"Gritty, esoteric, funny and passionate, Currier's courageous prose reminds us that we must never forget."
—*Edge*

Still Dancing

New and Selected Stories

Jameson Currier

Praise for the stories of Jameson Currier

"The breadth of Currier's personal experience is evident in his writing, which is moving without resorting to melodrama, familiar without feeling clichéd. In the new book's title story, for instance, he describes a man who has lost many friends to AIDS as feeling 'like a boy lost at an amusement park who can't find his family and doesn't understand why they are not where they should be.' It's a characteristically vivid yet unsentimental description of what it's like to wake up and find that your entire chosen family, your whole support system, is suddenly gone—and many people who survived the worst years of the epidemic will likely find that Currier has, once again, put into words the things that they've felt for years."
—Wayne Hoffman, *Windy City Times*

"Currier's latest collection of stories reveals a long, textured chronicle of gay men, gay life, and the horrific AIDS epidemic that both threatens and empowers an entire population. His tales tell of the initial shock and bewilderment in trying to come to grips with a deadly new menace to gay men's health in the 1980s, coupled with an unending sense of grief and hopelessness. Be forewarned: these are not sunny stories, but they're as real as it gets. Currier's fiction isn't the kind with the Hollywood happy ending secured with a pink ribbon. Currier is a bright, astute writer and a survivor, having lived in New York City for 30 years and experienced much of the stark, heavy content reflected in his stories. They are markers—intense reminders of our collective history."
—Jim Piechota, *Bay Area Reporter*

"Currier is adept at drawing a fine line between the erotic and the tragic, and at telling stories that 'although personal, are also the stories of our community.' "
—Erik Burns, *The New York Times Book Review*

"In these stories, Currier fictionalizes queer life and times from three decades of the AIDS era, capturing the years in his prose. It has the literary heft of Camus and the quiet urbanity of Cheever.... Currier chronicles not only a defining era in gay America, but the private lives of the people who triumphed through what looked like defeat. These lives are often so finely drawn, Currier never has to resort to cliché... Gritty, esoteric, funny and passionate, Currier's courageous prose reminds us that we must never forget."
—Lewis Whittington, *Edge*

"These are stories of survival and hope, and of loss and remembrances, of people reacting with emotions ranging from somber depression to conscious denial, and the chance to value each day of life as a gift not to be taken lightly. In effect, this is not really a book about the evolution of the AIDS epidemic, but one dealing with how our community survived and adapted, growing stronger despite (or because of) the devastation the disease brought to us. I find it impossible to pick out a favorite, as each unique tale is noteworthy on its own merits. Much recommended, as much for younger readers as for those who experienced the first years of the epidemic."
—Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*

"I have read and re-read these stories, delighted in them and savored each one. How is it that fiction can so successfully transcend and translate science? Jameson Currier's kind of fiction can recreate reality more accurately than a cinema verité account of our daily lives... Currier captures the bittersweet existence of gay men living through this holocaust, the afterglow when the bombs have fallen and before news of further devastation reaches them."
—Abraham Verghese, *The Washington Post Book World*

"As moving as any in literature about AIDS."
—*Booklist*

"Jameson Currier's writing has the quiet power of a river—with its depths and shallows, undercurrents, serene beauty and its occasional sweeping rapids. Currier's writing carries the reader along, under and above the emotions of the AIDS epidemic. These are stories we hold in each of us. Currier gives them a voice and gives them back to us."
—Richard Brazwell, *Baltimore Gay Paper*

"Currier has the gift for compressing a novel's worth of plot, character and theme within the confines of a short story."
—Jesse Monteagudo, *The Book Nook, Gay Today*

"His characters are so believable that you'll swear Currier draws from real life. One thing's for sure: The author writes about love as only someone who has lost it can. Bravo"
—Kevin O'Leary, *Poz*

"Some people may refrain from reading *Dancing on the Moon* out of a discomfort with AIDS. That would be a shame. As the band plays on, AIDS spirals deeper into our lives. To ask fiction to ignore what it has always done best: mirror the times in which we live, and the ways in which we survive, *Dancing on the Moon* reaches to fulfill that obligation with an effort of the first order. For that reason, and for the sheer good talent of Jameson Currier, this collection deserves a wide readership."
—Robert Drake, *Baltimore Alternative*

"Jameson Currier writes about the way in which AIDS influenced his life and the LGBT community. An important aspect of short story writing is for the writer to not only intrigue the reader quickly, but also leave the reader with a seed, that if planted correctly, will continue to grow and mature; Currier does this admirably, and with great élan."
—*Bookends, Liberty Press*

Also by Jameson Currier

Dancing on the Moon

Where the Rainbow Ends

Desire, Lust, Passion, Sex

The Haunted Heart and Other Tales

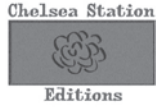
The Wolf at the Door

The Third Buddha

Still Dancing

New and Selected Short Stories

Jameson Currier



Chelsea Station Editions

New York

Still Dancing by Jameson Currier
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These stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Some of the stories in this work were published, some in different versions, in the following: "What They Carried," "Winter Coats," "Dancing on the Moon," "Ghosts," "What You Talk About," "Reunions," "Montebello View," "Jade," "Who the Boys Are," and "Civil Disobedience" were published in the author's collection *Dancing on the Moon: Short Stories about AIDS,* first published in 1993 by Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA. "What They Carried" was reprinted in *Making Literature Matter*. "What You Talk About" first appeared in Christopher Street. "Civil Disobedience" first appeared in *Christopher Street* and was reprinted in *Velvet Mafia*. "Reunions" first appeared in *Certain Voices*. "Who the Boys Are" first appeared in *The Right Brain Review*. "Pasta Night" first appeared in *Circa 2000: Gay Fiction at the Millennium*. "Fearless" first appeared in *Men on Men 5*, was excerpted in *Man of My Dreams*, and reprinted in the author's collection *Desire, Lust, Passion, Sex*, published by Green Candy Press. "Everybody is Always Somebody Else" first appeared in *Velvet Mafia*. "Health" first appeared *in Art & Understanding*. "Someone Like You" first appeared in *The Mammoth Book of New Gay Erotica* and was reprinted in *Best Gay Stories 2008*. "Still Dancing" first appeared in *Rebel Yell: Stories by Contemporary Southern Gay Authors*. "The Best of Bobby Red" first appeared in *Porn!: Dirty Gay Erotica*. "Do I Know You?" first appeared in *I Do/I Don't: Queers on Marriage*. "Manhattan Transfer" first appeared in *Confrontation*. *Still Dancing: New and Selected Stories* was first published by Lethe in 2008.

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To my friends, living and remembered.

Introduction

It would have been easy for me to answer "yes" when Steve Berman's e-mail arrived with an offer to have Lethe reprint *Dancing on the Moon*, my 1993 collection of short stories about the impact of AIDS on the gay community. But I have never chosen the easy route for anything, and the truth is, my writing about AIDS did not begin and end with that book. After its publication I began writing reviews of gay and AIDS-themed books—fiction and nonfiction—for a variety of local and national newspapers and magazines, both gay and mainstream—wherever I was wanted and wherever I could get published. Dancing also led to my participation of creating a script for Kermit Cole's documentary *Living Proof: HIV and the Pursuit of Happiness*, about the HIV-positive men and women who were the subjects of Carolyn Jones photographs, as well as becoming a contributor to Body Positive, a monthly magazine published by the Manhattan AIDS organization. AIDS also became the subject of my first novel, *Where the Rainbow Ends*, about the impact of the epidemic on a family of friends.

And many years later I find that I am still not finished writing about AIDS. Like other survivors, I both count my blessings and find myself haunted, so a few of these stories are recently written and reflect the changes AIDS has taken since those first stories were published in *Dancing*. For this edition I've chosen stories that

revolve around gay New Yorkers—those lost, those surviving, those displaced, those undaunted, and those who became expatriates.

The stories I have assembled here were written over the course of three decades. Ten are tales that were in *Dancing on the Moon* ("What They Carried," "Winter Coats," "Dancing on the Moon," "Ghosts," "What You Talk About," "Reunions," "Montebello View," "Jade," "Who the Boys Are," and "Civil Disobedience"), and one ("Fearless") is from my collection *Desire, Lust, Passion, Sex,* written shortly after the first collection was published. Another, "Pasta Night," was a chapter in an early draft of *Where the Rainbow Ends*, which was dropped during the editing process. "Health" was the first story I wrote after the shift the disease took following the implementation of the "drug cocktail" therapy and first appeared in *Art & Understanding*, a magazine of AIDS culture where many of my early works found a home. Like "What You Talk About" and "Fearless," "Someone Like You" is a dating story, but this one, written in the third decade of the epidemic, reflects the easing of the divide that had separated sero-discordant partners as HIV infection became more medically manageable. "Everybody is Always Somebody Else" and "The Best of Bobby Red" reflect my background in the theater and my dip into gay male erotica, as well as depicting the epic scope of the plague. "Still Dancing" and "Do I Know You?" are simple survivors' stories—one sentimental, another humorous. And the two stories that frame this collection ("The Chelsea Rose" and "Manhattan Transfer") were written about the history of the inhabitants of a Chelsea apartment building, depicting the migratory path of its residents and the deep devastation the epidemic left on a generation of gay men.

I am grateful to the editors, publishers, readers, and fellow writers who helped shape these stories, most notably Ed Iwanicki for his encouragement early in my writing career and his suggestions in the writing and compiling of the stories that became *Dancing on the Moon*, and also David B. Feinberg, for

his introduction to Ed and his own advice and friendship. Special thanks are also due to Anne H. Wood and Brian Keesling, who have weighed in on all my writing, to Kevin Patterson, for the imprint he made both on my life and my writing, and to Arch Brown for coming to my rescue when I needed an important lift. I have also been blessed by working with Hermann Lademann on Where the Rainbow Ends, and Kevin Bentley and Andrew McBeth on *Desire, Lust, Passion, Sex*, and their imprints can be found in these pages along with those of Sean Meriwether, Lawrence Schimel, Darryl Pilcher, Robert Drake, David Bergman, Greg Wharton, Ian Philips, David Waggoner, Jay Quinn, and Martin Tucker. Special thanks are also due to the New York Foundation for the Arts for its fellowship that arrived at a well-needed moment, Anne-Laure Hubert and Olivier Gainon of CyLibris, who brought my AIDS stories to a French-speaking audience, and Steve Berman of Lethe Press, who has given me—and many other gay writers—a new home for our works when it is most needed. Thanks also to Richard Labonté, Greg Herren, Paul Willis, Charles Flowers, Aldo Alvarez, Christopher Navratil, David Groff, David Olin Tullis, Michael Rowe, Jim Marks, Jonathan Harper, Wayne Hoffman, Mark Sullivan, Terry Wolverton, Toby Johnson, Matt Chapin, Tom Cardamone, and Tom Long. And no thanks would be possible without those to my co-workers, among them Kathy Corey, Ellen Herb, and Edward Bohan, and to my friends Martin Gould, Larry Dumont, Jon Marans, Deborah Collins, John Maresca, Joel Byrd, Jonathan Miller, and Andrew Beierle.

Jameson Currier
September 2008

Death ends a life,
but it does not end a relationship,
which struggles on in the survivor's mind
toward some resolution which
it may never find.

—Robert Anderson

The Chelsea Rose

In my early twenties I lived in Chelsea before it became a gay mecca, before the explosion of cruisy gay shops and restaurants and bars along Eighth Avenue and every gay boy in the known world showed up in warm weather to show off his physique. I was just out of college and new to Manhattan, arriving in the city at the end of the seventies with a duffel bag stuffed full of baggy, ill-fitting clothes and a manual typewriter that I had saved up to buy and bring with me because I wanted to be a writer. The place I found to live was with a man named Frank in an apartment on West Nineteenth Street in a building I would soon learn was nicknamed "the Chelsea Ho's" because it was full of gay men—couples, roommates, subletters, disco bunnies, and clones. Chelsea might not have been a destination yet in the guidebooks, but the neighborhood was already full of gay men.

The Chelsea Rose was built in the mid-fifties, on eleven lots which had once been parcels of the original estate of Thomas Clarke, who named the area after the Chelsea district in London. A series of row houses that fell into deterioration after the onset of the Great Depression were demolished and the pink-colored bricks for the façade were shipped in by truck from Pennsylvania via the new turnpike. The architect was a commuter from Connecticut with ambitions grander than a six-story one-hundred-fifty-unit apartment building with a lower level garage, hence the square, unobtrusive, utilitarian design, like something that might have

been built a decade later behind the Iron Curtain.

Frank's minimalist taste seemed to properly fit this "new age" dwelling. His furnishings were covered in solid, dark fabrics and outlined with shiny chrome. My room in the one-bedroom apartment was really the living room, where a long, freestanding steel closet had been joined to a sliding screen door covered with fabric to create a small, private space where I could live and sleep. The space was just big enough for a queen-sized bed, which jutted up against the wall and the windows and which I framed on the other side with a board resting on top of two small night stands to create a desk where I could write.

My roommate was a leatherman, tall and swarthy, with a thinning hairline and a thick, groomed beard, and still well built in his early forties. Frank was never a man of many words, unlike many of the talkative and opinionated friends I would soon make in the city. My interview to be his potential share had consisted of Frank opening his closet and showing me his various uniforms and leather chaps and vests and asking what I thought of them. As I recall, I said something truly shy and banal, like, "Neat," because they were all clean and well-ordered and hanging on a series of wooden hangers and what had really caught my eye and shocked me was a plastic crate on the closet floor full of dildos of various sizes, shapes, and colors.

I had no idea what the leather scene was all about, nor for that matter, really, what one could expect to do with a crate of enormous dildos. Instead, my head was full of the extraordinary tales of my college friends, a roaming band of itinerant musicians that I had once been a part of and that I wanted to put down on paper and try to fashion into a story that I might sell as either a novel, a screenplay, or in my wildest and most successful dreams, see turned into a television miniseries. By day I worked as a proofreader at a law firm downtown, and at night, when I wasn't trying to meet another young gay man my age at the bars in the West Village—then the gay mecca—I was sitting at my cobbled-

together desk writing out my stories—furiously and noisily typing while Frank was out of the apartment and on the prowl, stopping when I heard the front door lock turn and the heavy-booted steps enter and head into his bedroom. I would sit at my desk then and pretend to read through my drafts, but I was really listening for whatever sexual sounds I could make out happening in the next room—boots being tossed against the floor, a pair of jeans being hung over a doorknob, a muffled gag of a cock being swallowed. If Frank had been lucky and found a sex partner for the night, I might hear a stifled "Mmmmmpffffggh" or a "Garrrrrrummmpfff" as they undressed or perhaps the bright sound of a hand slapping against bare skin or a light whummmpf, which I took to be the fall of two large bodies against the springy mattress of Frank's bed. Sometimes there was a thunderous crash against the wall, or a series of large bangs—whoomp, whoomp, *whoomp*!—and in my innocent and vivid mind, I imagined it was one of those giant dildos bouncing off the wall after Frank had pulled it out from the bottom of his closet and tossed it to his companion, growling out as he pitched it across the room, "Here, try this one. No, try *this* one."

I was more successful meeting other gay men in my building than I was at the bars in the Village. Our apartment was on the fifth floor and there were two small elevators in the badly tiled lobby—one of which was always out of commission and the other seemed to take days before it could complete its ascent or descent. The wait would always bring someone into the lobby and my Southern upbringing and politeness never allowed me to ignore them, and so I found ways to greet these strangers with a soft "Hey," or a short remark about the weather. This was how I met Walt, a lawyer who lived on the floor below me, and Nick, an overly handsome salesman who worked at Barney's, the men's clothing store a few blocks away, and Yuri, a British-Indian exile from London who was always pretending he was still out dancing at a club—all gay men roughly my age who across the years became familiar faces and later good friends while I lived in the Chelsea Rose. There were

also one or two guys I learned to ignore or avoid—Joe, an older, heavyset man who was usually unshaved and reeking of alcohol no matter what time of day you rode the elevator with him and who was always propositioning me (or anyone else around), and Matt, a tall, wiry, ex-Southerner like myself, whose proposition during my second month of living in the building I *did* accept. On the elevator ride to Matt's apartment on the fourth floor, I had hoped that I was finding a friend in the city who might also become a steady boyfriend. Instead, I was floored by Matt's aggressiveness the moment we were in his apartment and then by his quick dismissal of me once we had both reached orgasms on his kitchen floor. After that encounter, he seldom acknowledged me again, though I would still widen my eyes and attempt to greet him with as warm of a "Hey" as I could continue to muster.

Paul and Keith both lived in the building, too—Paul was in a small studio two floors below me, Keith in a one-bedroom apartment on the sixth floor. I'd always believed that because we were all gay and roughly of the same generation and trying to become writers that we were therefore connected and friendly and united with one another. Nothing could have been further from the truth between these two particular guys. Paul snarled and grumbled about Keith being a closet queen. And Keith dismissed Paul as a pornographer trying to be comic.

Paul was short and dark—curly black hair, dark eyes, hairy arms, a fur line peeking out beneath the collar of his polo shirts. His physique might have been considered stocky if his personality were not so sharp and agile, and a long curved nose and a closely groomed goatee made him look older and already corrupted. As it was, Paul had been around the block quite a few times when I met him in the lobby while waiting for that anemic elevator—he'd started having affairs with older men when he was all of eleven, growing up in the suburbs of Boston and hanging outside the local department store tea room where he would meet married guys for a little adventure in their cars or perhaps in a rented motel room,

sometimes accepting whatever cash or extra gifts his admirers wished to bestow on him. Paul had also kept a meticulous journal of his sex life since those early days—names, phone numbers, cock sizes, favorite positions and fetishes of his partners—admiring and admonishing details that never failed to amaze me when he would crack it open and begin to read passages out loud on the afternoons I might hang out in his apartment. At the time, I could never imagine anyone publishing such smut—it seemed much more like blackmail to me than creative writing—but Paul had an angry comic edge to his observations so that it was hard not to be enthralled by his bitter, ranting prose, a sort of "Don't fuck around with me you big ole homos because I've got all your numbers and they are right here in this little book of mine." I was spared any sexual involvement myself with Paul because every time it seemed we were chemically pulled in that direction we both backed away. Paul was also subject to a litany of "the perks of the profession," as he liked to describe his maladies, never failing to mention when we would be eating out at a restaurant, for example, that one night after spending two hours drinking and all of twenty minutes with his legs up in the air with a butch opera queen who lived on Fifteenth Street, he was now tangling with amoebas or anal warts or a nasty little drip.

If Paul was all about the bitter truth of "in-your-face sexual details," Keith was about subtlety and romance and therein lay the root of tension between them. Keith, too, had been raised in the suburbs—he in New Jersey—and while he had had quite a few sexual adventures of his own at an early age he preferred the more discrete gentleman's path of keeping the "nasty little secrets" to himself, unless their revelation served a better truth or purpose. Keith was blond and handsome, an all-American athlete with perfect posture and preppy clothes, the kind of boy who was voted "Best Looking" or "Most Likely to Succeed" in his high school senior class (which he was). He was never at a loss for dates or boyfriends or tricks, the kind of guy who might walk

into a bar, buy a beer, and be ready to leave in a matter of minutes with the other hottest guy in the room. Keith might not have been more discriminating about who his sexual partners might be, but he was also not a man who you would expect to "kiss and tell" the details. Unlike Paul, he was not out to his family or his co-workers at the advertising agency where he worked, and in those days living in a building in Chelsea populated by other unmarried men was not a dead giveaway of one's homosexuality. Keith also pursued a more traditional path to becoming a writer, narratively grappling with the issues of coming out or acceptance of homosexuality as opposed to Paul's strident, spontaneously created riffs and lists about his sex partners. Keith wanted to write plays and screenplays about characters who were shaped or quelled by society or family pressures or economics or politics, always a bit more theatrical and novelistic in his thinking as a character's layers were peeled back, challenged, and truthfully revealed. Whenever we went out to see a movie or a play together, afterward, Keith would want to deconstruct what we had seen, musing about what the playwright or screenwriter or director had done right or wrong, or looking for ways it might have been improved. So if Paul was like a continual stand up comedy routine, then Keith was a BBC melodrama waiting to air.

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I met Keith on a hot summer afternoon on the fire escape outside my bedroom window. I was too poor to afford a day trip to the Hamptons or Fire Island and too uncertain of how to navigate Coney Island or the Jersey Shore on my own, and after waking up one Saturday morning with a muddy sinus headache from the rattling air conditioner Frank had installed sideways in the narrow kitchen window, I crawled to the edge of my bed, opened the window and sat out on the fire escape and smoked a cigarette. We lived in the rear of the building where a short tree and weeds grew

in a small plot of land that might have been turned into a nice courtyard of stone paths and blooming shrubbery if the landlord or super had found the urge to clean away the debris of bottles and cans and clothing that had fallen to the ground from the carelessness of the tenants. That morning, I smoked and watched a breeze make its way through the greenish-brown leaves of the tree and a figure move across the window of another apartment. My cigarette smoke must have drifted up and through Keith's opened window—he lived in the apartment directly above ours—because he leaned out and yelled down to me, "That's a rather nasty habit to have so early in the morning."

I apologized and instead of offering me further admonition, he pitched his head farther out of the window and asked what book I had pulled out of the apartment with me to read on the fire escape. It was *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, and I was reading it because I thought I could find some kind of clue to how my stories should proceed. Keith said that it was an admirable effort, not the author's best, though Kerouac was certainly talented and had been a remarkably handsome man if his pictures were truthful, and that if I wanted to be a really good writer and I hadn't read E. M. Forster, then I should, because there was a lot to glean from him, especially if I wanted to create three-dimensional characters with problems and secrets. I was astonished that Keith knew that I wanted to be a writer, because I had not revealed that fact to him, and I know I must have given him a sort of open-mouthed look of awe.

"Matt told me," Keith said, as if he were reading my mind. "Bragging in the elevator. Asked me if I had met you yet. Why don't you come up for lunch? I mean brunch. That's what everyone's calling it now."

An hour or so later, after a shave and a shower, I took the interior stairs up a floor and knocked on the door of Keith's apartment. Inside, it had the feel of a perfectly ordered and dusted gift store. There was a roll top desk and comfy leather chairs, and on the walls were framed posters and photographs from his favorite movies

and musicals (a hand-painted color photo of Audrey Hepburn from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, a dry-mounted three-sheet of a *Mary Poppins* subway ad). On his bookshelves were memorabilia from television shows (a model of the Enterprise, 3-D glasses from *The Time Tunnel*) and rows of snow globes he had collected on travels with his family, from as far away as Tahiti, Chile, and Tokyo. His books were divided into fiction and nonfiction, as though they were on library shelves waiting for readers to arrive; his record albums were alphabetized and classified according to genre: musicals, pop, classical, and jazz.

Seated at his kitchen table, I watched him skillfully make an omelet at his stove while a compilation tape of British show tunes he had recorded from various original cast albums played on his stereo. As we sat and ate, we talked about our favorite music and movies and books, and I grew comfortable enough to recount the absurdly comic plots of my stories about my roaming musician friends. I was smitten with Keith the moment I walked through his apartment door, head over heels, really, unlike I had ever been in all of my naïve twenty-two years. I was somewhat on the defensive, too, not wanting to look like the sex-starved slut Matt had picked up. And I also knew I was out of my league. In high school, popular, athletic guys like Keith never hung out with geeky, bookish guys like me, or so went the stereotype that had been driven into my head, so I sat there at his kitchen table and was nervously self-deprecating, talking about how I would probably never finish my stories because I hadn't a shred of talent, a habit I had developed to avoid looking conceited and self-involved.

After lunch, I helped Keith clean up the plates and pans, and then we sat awkwardly on his couch talking more about writing and writers until Keith leaned closer into me and said, "We should probably get this out of the way, if we're to be good friends."

He placed a hand at the back of my neck and drew me into a kiss. It was thrilling and involved and long and memorable, and when it was done, when one of us pulled away for air (in my

headiness of even recalling the moment I can't remember who pulled apart first), Keith reached for my hand, tugged me off his couch, and led me into his bedroom.

He slipped his T-shirt off over his head and then, pausing to bend, he slid off the shorts he had been wearing (without any underwear beneath). Suddenly there he was nude, lying facedown on his bed, his bottom aimed skyward for me to admire. And it was a beautiful ass, as asses go, magnificent, really, when I stand back and remember some of the bottoms that have been offered up to me over the years. I stood beside his bed, nervous and shaky and young and somewhat innocent—and knew this was moving faster than I wanted it to proceed. Whatever moment of arousal I had felt on the couch had dropped away from me, and as much as I wanted my cock to respond, it remained stubborn and flaccid, as if it had a mind of its own and were telling me that this was not what I should want from this man—or expect to receive from him at this moment in time. I knew I wanted more kissing and fondling and complimenting and cuddling before I reached that aggressive desire to fuck Keith—and, in spite of my quick, heartless encounter with Matt, I had always been of the mind-set that sex wasn't an end to reach but a path that could lead to deeper feeling. I leaned down and pressed my lips against the upper rise of Keith's buttocks, right where the muscle swells and curves, and I used one of my hands to softly cup and knead his balls. I must have lost consciousness at this point—or, rather, lost the consciousness that time was passing and this was all I was doing, for after a while of my staying there, not wanting things to change, Keith flipped over and began to masturbate and I realized that I was still standing over him, still clothed in my baggy T-shirt and shorts, watching him as if he were some fantasy I was viewing from a porn film.

He stroked and jerked and arched himself into an orgasm, reaching for a small towel in his night stand to dry himself when he was done. He asked me if I wanted to "get off, too," and I boyishly shook my head, "no," knowing that when I got downstairs to my

apartment the scenario would be delightfully replayed in my mind over and over to satisfaction.

And this did get something out of the way between us and allowed us to become good friends. I never again considered Keith as someone who I wanted to turn into a lover or a fuck buddy or hoped to have another chance to seduce on an accidental, drunken night, because something did bond between us that afternoon, and Keith, as our friendship progressed, told me the details and dreams and despairs that I knew he did not tell his other friends—things that were as intimate and shocking and amusing as the pages of Paul's diary, which he was submitting to editors to try to get published.

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I always suspected that Keith was one of the entries in Paul's little book of sexual adventures—there was the fact that they had tried to organize a group of gay writers with three other Chelsea boys the spring before I arrived in Manhattan, which had fallen apart after Paul had read something that was clearly about the beauty of Keith's bottom—apparently it was well-known (and well-regarded and well-sought-after) in the building and in the neighborhood, and when Keith realized what was transpiring and tried to stop Paul from finishing his exposé, Paul tore the pages up and laughed and bragged that he had more than enough details to set Keith's career back a few notches. Keith's retaliation was not immediate but happened some time later, when Paul was enjoying the success of a soft-core porn magazine publishing a regular column of his sexual episodes. The retaliation took the form of a "Letter to the Editor" entitled "My Night with Paul," wherein Keith recounted an evening in the back room of a Village bar where he noticed a snarling little creature on the floor that everyone with any common sense had tossed aside for something better.

It got to be that I could not tell one of my adventures with

the other. It didn't help, either, that all three of us—four of us, if you include Frank, were members of a gym on Eighth Avenue. I preferred to work out in the mornings before going into the office, avoiding the cruisy evening crowds because I lacked the self-confidence to believe that whatever exercise I was doing had the ability to chisel and define and transform my boyish, stick-like physique into something more desirable. Keith would sometimes call and ask me to meet him at the gym after work, though that was usually like going alone because by the time I had gotten to the locker room and changed into my workout clothes, Keith had already found another playmate for the evening. "You don't mind, do you?" he would whisper in my ear when he would find me waiting in line to use one of the weight machines, and then, when I had assured him that all was well between us, he would follow with something like, "I've been trying to meet this guy for over a year," which was never the truth, though he always ended our conversation with, "I'll make this up to you. We'll go to the Met this weekend." Or if not the Met, then it was MoMA or something equally urban and chic and glamorous and sure to be reported on the news. A private reception at the Yale Club or a lecture at The Players. A concert at Radio City or a taping of *Saturday Night Live*. And sometimes we actually did these things he promised we would do. And sometimes, once again, I was brushed aside for someone more handsome or more wealthy or more well-connected or just, well, more immediate and sexual.

Paul never asked me to go with him to the gym—he was too much in competition with everyone—including me—over snagging the next guy, though when he spotted me exercising he would always interrupt my routine and spend a few minutes gossiping about whomever was also in the room. "Do you think she ever takes those things out to give 'em a good wash?" he might remark about a sweaty, beefy guy whose pierced nipples were evident through his damp tank top, or "She's been wearing that outfit since *before* Stonewall," he would say about one of the

older guys at the club who had a penchant for wearing too-tight T-shirts and spandex shorts. Sometimes he might launch into a plaintive monologue about how unfair it was that some men were better looking than others, and if Keith were in the room working out—or cruising another guy—I could usually detect their glares, frowns, and subtle snarls at each other, and Paul would go into another wicked spin, "I heard she's been sucking up to a producer," or "I heard she just got rejected *again* from the Public."

Sometimes I would be appalled that Paul would use me as bait, like the way Elizabeth Taylor was used on the beach in *Suddenly, Last Summer* to lure other men. One evening when I was there with Frank, Paul appeared and began to pump Frank for details about the management of the gym. Frank knew the managers and most of the staff and I knew that I should have warned Frank about revealing too many dirty little facts to Paul, knowing that sooner or later they would find their way into print and embarrass us all. As it was, Frank offered Paul introductions and the two of them went off together into one of the back offices. After I finished my workout, I undressed in the cramped, ground floor locker room, wrapped a towel around my waist, and headed downstairs toward the steam room. Inside, it was hot and foggy and crowded and I could not immediately see a place to sit. I walked a few steps in several directions, front—back—to the side—trying not to be too surprised to find two guys masturbating or kissing or fooling around. As I made my way toward the back where the mist was hotter and thicker, I discovered Paul giving Frank a blow job. It was at times like this that I felt my world was just a little too small for comfort.

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It never occurred to me how my life would change. I lived almost ten years in the Chelsea Rose and by my fourth year the gay landscape of the city was quite different from when I had arrived. As the changes began, those first few years played out with denial

and uncertainty and worry and fear, though the possibility of a gay cancer didn't prevent any of us from looking for boyfriends or chasing after potential sex partners. The true change arrived with a blood test that divided us into two camps: those who had it and those who didn't.

At first, Paul and Keith both refused to be tested though they had each had more than one former sex partner who was no longer healthy or alive. I went as soon as I knew it was available because I could not live with the uncertainty, though I told no one of my appointment at the clinic to be tested, nor, two weeks later, of my negative result, because I was too astonished by the reprieve and too guilty over the fact that I had somehow been spared infection. I knew instinctively the day I arrived home to learn that Frank had not been given the same acquittal. Our bedroom doors were seldom closed now unless we wanted to privately entertain someone. Frank and I had developed a close friendship over our years as roommates, sharing Chinese or Mexican takeout one or two evenings a week or smoking a joint and watching a movie together in his bedroom. Frank was a man of routines—in and out of the bathroom in thirty minutes in the mornings, workouts Tuesday and Thursday evenings and Saturday afternoons, clubbing or prowling on Saturday nights—and I knew something was off. If he was home this early in the evening and behind closed doors something was wrong. Or he was sick.

There was nothing I could do or say except respect his privacy and wait until he was ready to disclose his news to me. Over the next few days, I kept myself accessible and good-spirited while I waited and silently watched a cloud of misery follow him. At night he did not sleep easily anymore and I often heard him walking back and forth past my door, opening the refrigerator to peer inside as if there were a remedy waiting, listened to him running water or flushing the toilet in the bathroom, and then his heavy steps resuming their pacing back and forth as he tried to grapple with the imposed changes ahead.

Late on the third night after his diagnosis he entered my room and whispered, "Jim, are you sleeping?"

I rolled over and sleepily answered, "Come on in," and he crawled in my bed beside me and said, "I don't feel like sleeping alone tonight."

In the darkness I nodded and shifted to make more space for him in the bed, but as he slipped under the covers and I rolled onto my side, he reached out and drew his hands around my waist and pulled me against his body. In our five years as roommates we had never slept together before and, after that night, we always slept together when we were both at home.

Though they weren't tested, Paul and Keith used their fears to shape their writing careers. Paul's comic vignettes about safe sex with his partners were being readily published in various gay newspapers and magazines and had given him enough notoriety to be approached by an editor at a mainstream publishing house to turn them into a book. Keith wrote a play based on the Biblical character of Lazarus, about a dying gay man given another chance at life, which had a successful run off-Broadway. My own fiction expired after I had set down my stories and was rebuffed by every notable agent and editor in town. As it happened, however, I left my proofreading job at the downtown law firm and took a job midtown copyediting a glossy, high-profile weekly magazine, which soon allowed me to write up one or two small, newsy items every issue about the city's art auction industry. And that gig opened the door for one of the city's daily newspapers to ask me to occasionally write a longer, freelance article, usually on the rising value of an artist or the complex ownership trail of an item up for bid. Soon I was being called regularly to write lengthy, detailed and meticulously researched investigative articles on the art market and any notion that I had entertained of becoming a fiction writer was soon forgotten, buried in the worry of too many other details.

Though I can compress time, I cannot circumvent the horrors of what was felt during those years. What must have extended over the period of four years, comes back to me as something without any existence in time—something that may have taken more like four minutes. Paul discovered a spot on his leg and went to his doctor to have it biopsied. At first the news came back that it was only a mole, and he was able to celebrate with a small gathering in his apartment, where we were so rowdy another tenant alerted the police and we were all chastised in the wee morning hours. Then the news arrived the following Monday that the slides had been confused with those of an elderly man living in Murray Hill and Paul's lesion was diagnosed as Kaposi's sarcoma. Paul's next doctor's visit revealed that his T4 cells were very low, but his immune suppressor T8 cells were high, and a group of maladies seemed to happen at once: thrush on his tongue, herpes in the anal area, blinding headaches that seemed to cause him partial blindness. The lesions were treated with radiation and DNCP applied directly to the skin, but when they were detected internally, Paul was for all intents and purposes considered by his doctor as gone. But Paul didn't give up treatment or hope. He tried ozone gas injections into his veins every day for two weeks, became sicker daily, and decided against continuing, against the advice of his physician. At the same time he started the ozone therapy he also started vitamin C injections. After several weeks, his veins were in terrible shape, and he switched to taking it in a powder form with orange juice. He continued writing, detailing every step of his illness. He was on ribavirin for two months, developed a persistent cough and a fever and lost weight, experienced a reversal and went to being ten pounds overweight in the second month, then decided to go on AZT.

Keith was in the middle of rehearsals for a new play when his vision became blurry and he collapsed and had a grand mal seizure. By referral after referral he found his way to a neurologist, but after a second seizure in a restaurant on West Fourth Street, his doctor

told him to take the HIV test. While standing at a pay phone in the theater lobby so that no one in the cast could eavesdrop on his call, Keith made a nurse tell him the result of his blood test. He had tested positive.

Things got worse. His memory began to fail him. He developed a painful abscess in his left armpit, which required surgery, then battled ongoing sinusitis and ear infections. After a series of tests and "special consultations" with physicians and medical school faculty experts on the Upper East Side, a lab technician pulled Keith aside and said it was "simply a case of full-blown AIDS." As more blackouts occurred, more consultations and specialists followed, until exploratory brain surgery uncovered that Keith had progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy, an untreatable brain infection with a ninety percent chance of mortality within six months of diagnosis for patients with compromised immune systems. In the space of one week Keith's new play opened and closed and he was hospitalized for the fourth time. His "turnaround" for almost two years was credited to AZT, though no one could really explain why, all of a sudden, it was as if a lamp had been switched back on and he seemed to radiate energy. Keith took Dilantin to prevent seizures, injected the blood thinner heparin twice a day to prevent blood clots, went on acyclovir, an antiviral, and swallowed Bactrim to avoid pneumonia.

Not long after this, I took an assignment to write an article that required me to spend a few weeks in Washington, researching the archives at the Library of Congress, and afterward, I went to Atlanta to see my parents—my father had been diagnosed with prostate cancer and though surgery had successfully removed all traces of the disease, I felt a visit was still in order. It was the longest I had been away from the city since moving to Manhattan, and I checked in every day or so with Frank. Frank's own battle had begun with night sweats and progressed to pneumonia and he'd reached a status quo with the illness that involved a battle with one infection or another. Frank's routine now consisted of vitamins

and minerals and support groups and macrobiotic foods. Together we'd settled into a sort of semi-intimate relationship where I was not quite a lover but something more than a carepartner.

It was the week after Thanksgiving when I returned to the Chelsea Rose and I smirked and rolled my eyes and tapped my toes as I waited for the elevator to arrive, realizing that nothing had changed in my absence. The tiles on the floor were still cracked. The muddy footprint which had appeared against the wall two years ago was still there. The missorted mail from two months before was still on the shelf waiting for a tenant who would never return.

But I was surprised when the elevator door opened and there were Keith and Paul, both looking thin and skeletal and glassy-eyed, as if they had forgotten who they were and what they were doing. I asked them where they were going, but they both looked blankly at me as if I were speaking a foreign language, and I figured they were each doped up from some sort of medication. As I stepped in closer to them—to prevent the elevator door from closing and having to wait again for its arrival—a horrible stench of shit wafted out and I immediately knew that wherever they were headed—one—or both of them—needed to be cleaned up first.

I joined them in the elevator with my suitcase and knapsack and pushed the button for Paul's floor, knowing it would be the shortest ride.

"He's on six," Keith said hoarsely, looking at the lit panel on the side wall of the elevator.

"You moved?" I asked Paul. Since I had lived in the building, Paul had been having ongoing battles with the landlord and the super over the maintenance of his apartment—a toilet that wouldn't flush, a leak from his upstairs neighbor's bathroom that caused endless rotting and mildew, and water seepage around his kitchen window from the deteriorating brickwork on the exterior of the building. But in the last year Paul had also been on disability and battling the high cost of his rent. I assumed that the landlord—

or perhaps even the city or a social agency—had arranged for a better apartment for Paul on Keith's floor.

"You're neighbors," I said. "That's great."

We watched the elevator doors open and close on Paul's old floor, then—instead of heading directly to my apartment—I pushed the button for the top floor because there was still a stench that needed to be dealt with and the smell seemed to be emanating more from Keith than Paul.

Keith also seemed the more incoherent of the two and as I walked the pair of them down the hall and stopped at Keith's door, I asked Keith gently where his keys were. "I've got it," Paul said with a snippy tone that if I didn't know him better I would have thought was laced with a tinge of jealousy. It was then, watching his hand tremble and insert the key into the lock, before I saw the disorder inside, that I realized they were now roommates. The large main room of Keith's apartment was full of boxes and items which had once been in Paul's apartment—lamps and books and piles of manuscripts and folders and a computer that had yet to be re-assembled. Paul had even meticulously peeled off his third-floor apartment wall a collage of naked men he had made from advertisements and porn magazines and reconstructed it on the wall of Keith's sixth-floor apartment, just opposite his couch.

I helped Keith out of his coat. His complexion was red, his face unshaved, and by now I knew that he was the one who had soiled his pants. I asked Keith if he wanted to get cleaned up and he blithely nodded, as if I were asking him if he wanted a bowl of ice cream. As I walked Keith toward the bathroom, I turned and asked Paul if he could find me a large plastic garbage bag. He frowned and glared at me, as though I were an intruder, and I soon overlooked his opening and slamming the kitchen cabinets while I helped Keith undress and discovered that there was blood in his stool.

"Do you want to go to the hospital?" I asked Keith.

He looked at me as if he were a frightened little boy and answered, "Not yet."

I had Keith sit in a tub of warm water first, then opened the drain and ran the shower, holding my arm out for him to balance himself as he was rinsed clean, a task that ended up soaking me as much as it did Keith. While I dried him off, I asked Paul to bag up the soiled clothes. Again, he offered me a frown and a glare, though he reluctantly did as I asked. When Keith was finally dry and in clean sweatclothes and sleeping in his bed, I found Paul asleep on the couch with the plastic bag of dirty, stinking clothes still in his grip.

He stirred as I took the bag from him and tied the top of it closed. I figured that I would take the bag with me down to my apartment, rinse out the clothes, and drop them off later that night at the laundry on the corner with some of my stuff from my suitcase.

"Where were you headed?" I asked Paul.

He looked at me as if he had not a clue to what I was asking him, then he furrowed his brow and answered, with a sheepish tilt of his eyebrows, "The steam room."

We both laughed a moment, releasing our tension, and it relaxed Paul enough that he began crying. "I thought I could help him," Paul said. "After all these years. They evicted me. If he hadn't seen me that day I would be out on the street. I can't even help myself."

After he had calmed down, I promised that I would check in on them later that night, and I went down to my apartment where Frank was cooking supper. I told him about my trip, about my work and my visit with my parents, and what had happened in the elevator on my return. He nodded and said that he had heard that Paul was evicted, but not that he was living with Keith, and he would make a call the next day to a friend of a friend he knew who volunteered as a buddy to see if he could find them some kind of ongoing assistance.

After eating and unpacking, I went upstairs to check on Keith and ask Paul more questions about their health and other things that Frank might need to know to tell his friend. After a few minutes of knocking louder and louder and no one coming to the

door, I cupped my ear and listened, hoping I might hear activity inside but detecting nothing.

Years ago, Keith had given me a set of keys, in case he was locked out or out of town and access was needed to his apartment, but I had never had use for them and could not remember where I might have put them. I was worried now that Keith and Paul were in more danger than when I left them earlier and I went downstairs and searched the kitchen drawer and the jewelry box where I kept my high school ring and cuff links and other such things like the spare apartment keys of friends and neighbors, but when I still could not find them I decided to use a flashlight and take the fire escape to see if I could rouse Keith or Paul by tapping on the window.

Outside, it had turned colder and started to snow. I hunched and shivered and tapped at the dark windows but no one approached or flipped on a light in the room. Even with the flashlight I could not detect anyone inside the apartment, and I went back down the steps and continued searching for the keys. I found them about an hour later, in the back of a box I was now using to store the floppy disks I used to save my files and notes while working on my computer.

Upstairs, I knocked on the apartment door before I entered, and when no one answered I let myself inside. No one was there. Paul was not asleep on the couch and Keith was no longer in his bedroom. I used the interior staircase to descend to the lobby and when I did not find them there, nor in the elevator as before, I walked outside into the snowy night. It seemed so futile and final, like the ending of a movie where nothing is resolved or solved—and I knew that there was no where I could find them now. The world was a bit bigger than what I could keep organized.

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That winter Keith had a long, slow decline. Paul had a new book published and there was always some sort of drama unfolding—he

hated his author's photo, which our neighbor Eric had taken, he hated the design of his book jacket, he hated the typesetting and felt his editor was trying to sabotage the book because certain scatological scenes and descriptions were excised. Keith lay in bed through most of this, sleeping or waking long enough to take in the detail of Paul's rantings and roll his eyes in sympathetic disgust. They both skipped the book party to celebrate the publication, which was held in the Soho loft of an agent Paul was threatening to fire. By that time Keith had lost his mobility and Paul had lost his patience. I attended the party because at the back of my mind was the notion that I might write something about Paul and his new book and our friendship. As it happened I was saddled with an assignment that meant more out-of-town travel and research and the next thing that I could write was Paul's obituary.

Yes, Paul went first. A sudden trip to the emergency room and he was dead before spring. Keith managed a few weeks more, with the help of his sister, then died, just as the weather was becoming warmer.

I helped his sister clean out the apartment, donating the clothes and record albums and books to thrift shops in the neighborhood, recycling his medications to a collective that operated out of a second-floor Village apartment, dispersing his furniture to other tenants in the building, and loading the remainder in a van that his sister drove back to New Jersey.

I lived with Frank for another nine months, watching the names on the mailboxes change, new faces walk out of the elevator, and, surprisingly, the chipped and cracked tiles in the lobby be replaced when the rumor started that the building was being gussied up with the hope that it might be sold or turn co-op.

Neither of those happened during my tenure in the Chelsea Rose. Frank left just as our Chelsea neighborhood was becoming more visibly alive with gay restaurants and gay bars and gay coffee houses and gay card stores and gay health organizations. I was on an assignment in London when he phoned me and told me of his plans to move. He explained that he had three options before him:

rough it out on his own with help from me and his other friends, move into a hospice where he was sure to die, or return to his family in Ohio where he could be certain of care and hope to get better. It felt so desperate and hasty and not well-thought-out to me when I hung up, though we spoke several times after that and Frank stood his ground. When I returned to Manhattan, Frank had moved out of the apartment, the rooms empty of his furnishings and order. I stood for a while in his bedroom amazed and weakened by the bright empty space, looked out at the tree in the courtyard that had now grown taller than our windows, and slid open his closet doors where I discovered his uniforms, his dirty magazines, his porn videos, and his crate of dildos were also missing. It bothered me that I did not know the details of his dispersal, where his things had gone to—into the trash or with him to his parents' house.

Those last few weeks I lived in the Chelsea Rose there seemed to be a lot of turnover in the building, or at least every time I waited for the elevator to arrive there was another new face or resident or tenant to meet. Paul's studio had been rented by a publicist from California who was only in New York occasionally for work; a psychiatrist and his designer boyfriend moved into the apartment that had formerly been Keith's, and thankfully I was spared the indignity of having to disappear if a realtor wanted to show Frank's apartment to prospective renters—the management of the building would at least wait until I was packed and gone, since I was paying the full rent till the end of the lease.

Ever since Paul's death I had also been mentally planning my escape from New York—and I knew it was only time and Frank which were preventing me from running away completely. I stayed on in the empty apartment for another three months, till I landed a foreign bureau offer for either Athens or Moscow. I chose Athens because it seemed to me like something grown-up and stable and permanent and the place I ought to be.

It was during my second month in Athens that a letter arrived for me at the bureau office. A short, dark-skinned boy with

the beginnings of a moustache flopped the letter on my desk as he dispatched the day's mail around the office. I recognized the handwriting right away—it was Frank's—and I was certain that it contained news of his turnaround, a miraculous recovery from a drug combination or treatment that soon all sorts of gay men would be experiencing themselves too. I'd been worried that I had made a huge mistake by basing myself in Athens—I couldn't speak the language and was finding learning the Greek alphabet more challenging than I had anticipated. I was sluggishly moving through a sweltering summer, working in a room where an air conditioner barely cooled the air around my head and I could hardly concentrate. My fantasies began working in overdrive before I opened the letter, believing that Frank was writing to tell me he was returning to Manhattan and asking me to join up with him again.

Inside the envelope were two letters; one from Frank's mother, explaining in her long, slanted handwriting what had happened to Frank; the other from Frank, written shortly before his death. In it Frank wrote how he regretted not telling me how much he loved me, how much he regarded those years we lived together, and how much it meant to him knowing that he could count on me for a simple hello at the end of a battering day. Also inside the envelope, Frank's mother had enclosed a clipping of Frank's obituary from his local newspaper—fifty-four, a devoted son and member of the community, struck down too early by an impossible disease.

I was replacing both the letters and the obituary in the envelope when something else inside caught my eye. Frank's mother had also inserted a photograph that had been trimmed down to a small wallet size, something that Frank must have carried around with him because it looked like it had been folded and creased a little too often. It was a picture that our friend Eric had taken of us together shortly after I had moved to Manhattan and in with Frank. We were in the middle of Eighth Avenue, a street fair happening around us, an impossible pair amidst all the festivities. Frank's long, muscular arm was draped across my boyishly thin

shoulder, looking more like my father than my friend. He was tall and proud and macho in his leather vest and jeans. I was in shorts and a baggy orange T-shirt, thrilled and excited to be living in Manhattan.

I replaced the photograph in the envelope and went through my day, interviewing a curator and the museum staff about the deteriorating conditions of artifacts in a museum warehouse. Sometime after lunch I opened the envelope again and reread the letter and obituary. I took out and studied the photograph and then placed it inside my wallet, where I have carried it around for years. I never told Frank that I loved him, either. And this was what I was left with to do.

What They Carried

John had carried the flowers since Perry Street, long-stemmed irises wrapped together by a pale-pink tissue. Now he held them across his lap in the taxi; a patch of his khaki pants had turned dark brown from the beads of water which rolled down the stems. Danny thought John would have tired of flowers; once a week he had carried irises to Adam. This afternoon, on their way to Seventh Avenue, John had hesitated in front of the florist, and Danny, recognizing the confused look which had rushed across John's face, had instinctively scooped up the flowers from the white plastic bucket. Shifting the weight of the canvas gym bag he was carrying to his left shoulder, Danny went inside and paid a small Asian woman, watching her eyes disappear into fine lines as she smiled and wrapped the irises together. Outside again, on the sidewalk, John raised his arms toward Danny, taking the flowers as though offering to hold a child. In the taxi, Danny lifted John's hand and smelled his wrist, wondering why the fragrance of flowers never lasted as long as cologne.

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Adam had carried only his briefcase to the emergency room. Inside was his wallet, his address book, a bottle of aspirin, and the reviews of the play he had been publicizing. Adam had tried calling John first, but he was out of the office, so he called Danny,

because he was worried and wanted help quickly. When Danny got to the hospital, Adam was already in a private room and had a temperature of 103. Danny took the keys to Adam's apartment and brought back to the hospital Adam's pajamas, bathrobe, slippers, razor, shaving cream, toothbrush, toothpaste, and pillow. By the time Danny returned, Adam was asleep and John was sitting in the chair beside the bed, watching the sun set through the windows that overlooked East Seventy-ninth Street.

The next day the doctors began their tests. Nurses drew blood and took away urine samples, though nothing was done specifically about the pain in Adam's lower back, which was the reason he had gone to the emergency room in the first place, Adam told Danny. John had to ask the nurses several times about getting some sort of medication to relieve Adam's discomfort, and finally got a doctor to order a prescription for Percodan. While Adam was being examined by yet another doctor, John and Danny sat in the waiting room, and John mentioned it wasn't the pain that had driven Adam to the hospital. He had been working too hard, had been trying to cover for his boss, who was on vacation. The producers were worried because the play wasn't a hit. Stress and exhaustion, John said, were the reasons Adam was here. Danny slumped down in his chair and rested his elbows against his knees, cupping his chin in the palms of his hands. Danny could tell Adam was thinner since last week; the youthful complexion had disappeared from his face, leaving behind an impression of bones and angles. Danny shifted his head till his eyes rested at a point somewhere beyond John. I wish I could believe that was the reason, Danny said. But I know it's not. Don't forget, I've been here before.

The following day John took off work and brought Adam flowers. Adam had not showered or shaved in three days. Lying in bed, he held the flowers across his chest and then asked John to help rearrange the pillows behind his neck. That night, Danny came by after work and brought the fruit salad that Adam had called and said he wanted, because, he added, he could not even

stand to smell the hospital food. Danny had stopped at the Korean grocery on Lexington Avenue and bought a container of sliced peaches, melons, and strawberries, as out-of-season as the flowers John had found. John brought a bottle of orange soda Adam had called and asked for. While Adam ate, slowly and uncomfortably, John and Danny sat near the bed and watched *Hollywood Squares* on the wall-mounted television set. Before they left, Adam threw up the food, and John helped Adam change into a clean T-shirt, while Danny wiped the floor and rinsed the soiled pajamas. In the hall outside Adam's room, John mentioned he was surprised Adam was getting worse. Don't people go into the hospital to get better? he asked. Adam had been in the hospital only last month, overnight, for a blood transfusion. Danny said nothing but shifted his feet so he could lean against the wall for support. Danny knew Adam had already passed the point; the virus had become a disease.

Adam told John he didn't want any visitors. Only John and Danny were allowed to come by. I don't want anyone to see me like this, Adam said. They would be upset and hurt. Some would be angry, he explained to Danny. He would be better in a few days and then would go home. And Adam said no one could bring him anything personal other than clothing and toiletries, not even a book or a radio or a *TV Guide*, anything, he noted, which would suggest he might be in the hospital for a while. After all, he said, I'm not planning on staying here long, and then, lifting his eyes to the ceiling and assessing himself realistically, added, I just don't want it to feel like a long time. In four days, Adam had dropped five pounds. He hated the hospital. He thought the nurses were inept; they couldn't even tell the difference between aspirin and Valium. They won't help me, he said. They can't stop the pain in my back.

And the doctors continued their tests: X rays of his chest, abdomen, and skull. There were bone scans, T scans, CAT scans, spinal taps, and another blood transfusion. By the end of the week,

when friends found out Adam had not been at work or at home, the phone beside his hospital bed began ringing, and Danny knew the visitors could not be stopped.

Wes brought a new pair of pajamas after John mentioned Adam had already thrown out three pairs and several hospital gowns. Cheryl, Adam's assistant, brought a bag of Pepperidge Farm Goldfish crackers, which at the moment she spoke with Adam on the phone was what Adam wanted, though they remained unopened in the top drawer of the hospital dresser. Roy brought current copies of *Spy* and *New York* magazines; Elliot brought Archie and Superman comic books. They all tried to smile, joke, catch Adam up on what was happening at work or in the news. They would clear their throats, change the subject, or avert their eyes when necessary, carrying their feelings inside, the way they knew they must, the way they knew Adam wanted. In the evenings, John and Danny would bring whatever food Adam wanted: lemon yogurt, canned peaches, pretzels, or taco chips. Most nights Danny stayed later than visiting hours, in case Adam threw up and needed to be changed.

And the tests continued. Steve brought an advance copy of the book he was editing on the Bloomsbury authors. Elliot brought scissors, which Adam used to clip his nails. Bob brought lip balm, which Adam wanted because he thought the hospital air was so dry. When the new pajamas found their way into the trash, John went to a discount store and bought six irregular large T-shirts, though Adam's favorite was the old gray shirt Danny pulled from his gym bag one night; Adam refused to wear it, instead keeping it rolled up next to his assortment of pillows. The office sent an arrangement of red and white columbines. Millie sent a basket of painted daisies. Roy brought yellow tulips. One night during the second week, Adam asked John to bring the bottle of cologne he kept underneath the towels in the closet of the apartment. If I'm not washing, he said, at least I can smell better than the flowers. When a postcard arrived at the hospital from London, from Harris,

Adam spent an hour trying to calculate how long it had taken to arrive by overseas mail, how long he had been in the hospital, and what day Harris had heard he was sick.

Cheryl said to Danny she had never realized the small red bumps on Adam's cheeks were Kaposi's sarcoma; she had thought it was acne that wouldn't go away. After all, she commented softly while Adam was sleeping, he'll bring almost anything back to his desk to eat. Although I do, too, she moaned, but he never had to worry about his weight. Later that week, Adam told John food had lost its taste. It only has a meaning now, he said, and the next day he stopped eating altogether. The nurses began feeding him with a machine suspended on a pole which pumped solutions of fats and minerals and vitamins through plastic tubes connected to a vein in his right arm. Adam seldom moved from the bed now. When he couldn't manage to push the pump to the bathroom, the nurses brought urinals and bedpans but were still sluggish about bringing him medication. John began to have problems coping with Adam's illness. So Danny began to wash Adam at night with warm, wet cloths and brought cups and pans of water from the sink so he could brush his teeth. Adam said he still had the pain in his lower back and the doctors could not find the cause. It's not even a brain tumor, Adam remarked during a commercial between rounds of *Jeopardy*. He turned his head away from the TV set and began to cry. All I want to do is go out and see a movie, he said. At a theatre. With real popcorn and butter. The next day Adam had a biopsy of the lymph glands of his neck. Two days later a doctor brought the news he had Burkitt's lymphoma. Danny made Adam call his mother in New Jersey and tell her he was sick. She's the only family you have, and you have to tell her, Danny said. It's not right to keep it a secret any longer. On Saturday, his mother came to the hospital, stayed two hours, and cried. On Monday, Adam began chemotherapy. Adam told Danny he was honestly going to get better. Because now he was ready to go back home.

Danny was surprised three weeks had passed. Many days he

could not find an order or sense of strategy to what had to be done, so he began to make lists: what to carry to the hospital, what he had to buy, whom he had to call, what he had to do when he got home. Danny carried the lists in his gym bag, pressed between the pages of his calendar. Inside, along with a bottle of ibuprofen, Danny carried antihistamine pills, decongestant tablets, and a box of cherry-flavored cough drops, because he never knew if the headaches he got in the late afternoons might actually be the start of the flu or a cold. There was also a comb, two ballpoint pens, a small scratch pad that Danny used to jot down notes, and a combination lock for his gym locker, though Danny had not made it to the gym since Adam first entered the hospital. Some days Danny worried the canvas bag would rip; when he added a book to read on the subway, and an umbrella or gloves because the weather could slip without warning between fall and winter, the weight would almost reach ten pounds.

The day Adam came home, John and Danny carried everything in duffel bags from the hospital to the fourth-floor apartment. Adam had been released and set up on a home-care program. A nurse would visit if needed; every night he would continue the intravenous fluids. Two delivery men from the home-care service carried up the stairs an infusion pump similar to the one that had stood next to the hospital bed, and three large boxes of supplies. Inside were vitamin, lipid, and insulin bottles, and an assortment of needles, syringes, and plastic tubing. Enough supplies for a month, a hospital representative told Danny. Danny cleaned the refrigerator to make room for the plastic bags of nutritional solution which Adam had to have for twelve hours each night. In his gym bag Danny now carried a change of clothing, in case he slept overnight at Adam's apartment; in his calendar he wrote every possible emergency number he might have to use. John made five extra sets of keys to the apartment, one for Danny, one for himself, others for Roy, Wes, and Elliot, so they could come and go as quickly and easily as necessary. Elliot went to the

grocery store to get the things Adam wanted to eat: frozen turkey tetrazzini and pizza, potato chips, mocha-nut ice cream, milk, and mint-chocolate-chip cookies. Roy went to the pharmacy to get the medicine the doctor had prescribed: Halcion for sleep, Xanax for anxiety, Nizoral for thrush, Zovirax for the herpes sores in Adam's mouth, and prednisone, Bactrim, allopurinol, and AZT. Adam complained about taking so many pills. His least favorite were the large yellow capsules, which he said were difficult to swallow. His voice sounds so strange now, Danny said to John when they were alone in the kitchen. It sounds as raspy as if he'd spent a lifetime smoking, and he's always coughing to clear away the phlegm.

That night, John and Danny helped Adam hook up the infusion pump, following the instructions a nurse had written for them. Before he left the hospital, Adam had had surgery to implant a catheter in his chest, because his arms had turned into long strands of bruises where the veins had collapsed from being punctured with too many needles. It took John and Danny over two hours to do what the nurse had demonstrated in less than twenty minutes. They injected insulin and liquid vitamins into the clear solution of a plastic bag, connected plastic tubing to the bag and a bottle of lipids, and then suspended them from the poles of the infusion pump. They washed their hands and ran the tubing through the machine, then wiped the end with gauzes soaked in isopropyl and povidone-iodine. John panicked at every step, convinced Adam would be murdered by an air bubble. Danny continued, steadying his hands by placing his arms on Adam's stomach till he had connected the liquid-filled tubing to the tubing that hung from Adam's chest. Adam, too, was anxious and nervous. I don't want to go back, he said, and could not fall asleep. He refused to take the Halcion or Xanax and stayed awake, sweating and worrying and rolling the pump to the bathroom because of his diarrhea.

The first week Adam spent at home, everyone carried the hope he was getting better. Roy picked up Adam's paychecks and did the best he could to sort through what bills could be sent to

the insurance company. Cheryl carried more insurance forms to the apartment. John did more grocery shopping; there never seemed to be enough paper towels, tissues, or garbage bags. Bob came by and trimmed Adam's hair. Elliot did the laundry. Wes took afternoons off from work to take Adam to the doctor's office for chemotherapy treatments. Danny arranged a meal service to deliver lunches to Adam in the afternoon. In the evenings, friends brought him dinner. Steve brought Chinese, Millie brought Italian, Bob brought cream of broccoli soup and an omelet from the restaurant where he worked. Adam said there was more food than he would ever eat, even if he did have an appetite.

When Danny arrived in the evenings now, he hung a change of clothing in the bedroom closet. His overnight kit, which contained soap, shampoo, deodorant, shaving cream, and a razor, found a permanent place by the bathroom windowsill. Danny slept on the floor beside Adam's bed; he was afraid of sleeping in the bed with Adam, because he was certain he would become tangled in the plastic tubes. Adam has always been a restless sleeper, John said. Before he became sick, he would toss so violently he would twist the sheet around himself till he cut off his circulation. When Adam could no longer make it to the bathroom in the middle of the night, even with help, Danny bought a bed pan, and John found the large plastic Donald Duck glasses to use as urinals, the ones Adam had brought back from his trip to Disney World.

Adam said afternoons were always the worst. He would be alone in the apartment, watching TV, when the depression would hit. But if anyone called, he refused to answer the phone, afraid of having someone hear the way his voice sounded. There were moments when Danny actually thought Adam was getting better. At least his spirits seemed to rise. At least he was eating. Every evening Adam would describe for Danny what he had eaten, how many bites he had taken, and if it tasted good or bad. Adam had also started coughing in his sleep, so fitfully Danny thought he wasn't sleeping well; Danny was surprised, then, when he asked

Adam one morning how he had slept and Adam answered, I'm sleeping better than ever.

Danny learned Adam's thoughts went through a cycle. One day it was, Am I going to die? Another, it would be, Do you think I'm going to die? Danny was never sure how to answer Adam's questions. Once, when Danny decided to be honest and Adam asked, How do I look?, Danny responded by saying, Okay. Adam lifted himself out of bed and walked to the mirror that hung on the back of the bedroom door, bracing himself by holding on to the doorknob. Just okay? he questioned, and began brushing his thinning hair. Please, he added, I still have my vanity, and he walked to the window and threw the brush outside.

The second week he was home, Roy and Danny took Adam to see a movie. Danny helped Adam walk down the four flights of stairs, his arms wrapped around Adam's waist so he would not fall because Adam refused to use the cane John had bought. Roy borrowed a car and dropped them off in front of the theatre on Fifty-ninth Street. Danny found it difficult to concentrate on the movie, even though Adam felt certain it would be nominated for a number of Academy Awards. Roy bought popcorn and sodas, though Adam ate nothing, coughing and squirming in his seat the entire two hours. Afterward, riding in the car back to the apartment, Adam said he wanted to get tickets to see *The Phantom of the Opera* and take a cruise to the Bahamas in the spring. When Roy and Danny were alone in Adam's kitchen, Roy said Adam was setting himself up for disappointments. Danny replied, It's the way Adam has always lived. He needs to look forward to something. Later, in the bedroom, Adam told Danny, Today was the first time I was actually afraid of dying.

Danny was concerned that Adam was telling him things he told no one else. When Roy or John or Wes or Elliot was out of the room, Adam would talk about how he had not had sex since July because of the pain in his back. Adam said he felt safe when Danny slept on the floor, though he knew it was selfish to ask so much

of him, but John was too inpatient, Roy flustered easily, and they never knew what to do if there was a problem. Once, Adam said to Danny, I'm so afraid you'll be so disgusted you'll walk away. Danny promised him he wouldn't leave, though Danny knew there were moments when he wished Adam would die quickly. Adam himself could be impatient: Danny was too slow bringing the medication or could not pick up the tissues fast enough from the floor. The glass of water was too cloudy or cold, the TV was not loud enough or too loud, or Danny had left his fingerprints on the lens after cleaning Adam's eyeglasses. Adam had now dropped six more pounds; at night, he would stretch out his arms and remark in a rather wry tone, I'm beginning to look worse than a Biafra baby.

On Wednesday, Wes invited friends over to watch *The Wizard of Oz* on TV. Roy decorated the living room with a rainbow of crepe paper. Cheryl made green cookies to eat when Dorothy reached the Emerald City. Danny carried Adam to the couch in the living room a few minutes before the movie was to start. John remarked it was odd it wasn't Sunday. Remember, Bob added, it was always telecast on Sunday nights. Elliot said when he was a kid his parents always made sure they stayed late at church that night just to torture him. Adam said the worst punishment his mother ever gave him was not letting him watch it one year. He cried so hard she finally relented, letting him out of his bedroom just as the Wicked Witch disappeared in a puff of smoke on top of the thatched roof. Steve said, Remember when we watched it all in black and white? Or when we had to go to someone's house to watch it in color, John added. Roy said his favorite was still *Peter Pan*. Remember when Mary Martin sang about Never-Never Land?

The next morning Adam said to Danny, We can't go on like this, and laughed weakly. How many men have said that to you in your lifetime? Still trying to shake the sleep from his body, Danny sat on the side of the bed and held Adam's hand. I should go back to the hospital, Adam said. This isn't fair to anyone.

The moment Adam said he felt better was the time he was

the most helpless, strapped in a wheelchair whizzing through a hospital corridor. It was almost fun, he told Danny later, all dressed in white, letting people I didn't even know worry about only me for just a few minutes.

The doctors began more tests: EKGs, EEGs, X rays, specimens, and cultures. The reason he went back, Adam said, was because he needed stronger chemotherapy, and he wasn't able to function at home alone the day after the dosages. He got angry only once, when a nurse said he wasn't trying hard enough when he refused to take a pill right away. He yelled back at her that she wasn't his mother. In fact, he added, I don't even like you, and besides, I didn't even ask for your opinion. The next day the stitching that held the catheter tubing in place fell apart. The doctor said it was impossible to perform the surgery again to repair it. Adam was too weak; now he weighed a hundred pounds. And an X ray showed a small black spot on his right lung. Another doctor said Adam wouldn't be able to sustain the amount of chemotherapy he would need. By the end of the night, the nurses had set him up on a respiratory system; oxygen rushed through plastic tubing to his nose. The next morning, Danny arranged for twenty-four-hour nursing care so Adam could go home. Adam had decided it was time to die.

It's not like I'm giving up, he said to Danny and John and Roy. It's just that I'm going to die naturally, without surgery or therapy or treatments which would only prolong my life by a couple of days.

This time, John and Danny carried Adam up the stairs in a wheelchair. Roy went and picked up more prescriptions: Duricef, Compazine, nystatin, propranolol, and dexamethasone. A nurse was always there to give Adam his medication and make sure he would eat. Danny told John he felt somewhat relieved. Now there is someone who knows what to do about the coughing, knows when he needs to drink liquids, knows what time he is supposed to take a pill, knows what to say and how to deal with the pain. Someone is there to help him be comfortable. John answered, It isn't like this is all new to us.

Danny told John, Adam always had a fascination with suicide. Didn't he remember Adam reading *Last Wish* by Betty Rollin? The first time he was in the hospital, Adam had asked if Danny could find someone who could get him Nembutal—his doctor had refused to give him a prescription. Adam mentioned suicide first to Danny because he knew it would upset John. Adam said that he wanted to live, but the quality of his life had deteriorated beyond depression. I've spent the last two months waiting, he said. Waiting for doctors and nurses and medicine and food and visits and friends. Roy cried when Danny told him Adam wanted to die swiftly and painlessly, but Danny knew that Adam would not kill himself, that Adam had carried himself with dignity for so long, he wouldn't want his life to end with disappointments. Roy told Adam he didn't want him to do it, but if that was his decision, then he would do his best to respect it. But no one would help Adam find the medication. Adam complained it had been easy in the book. When Adam asked Danny to just open the window and let him jump, Danny said no, and Adam said he would do it himself. Danny laughed and tried turning it into a joke: How could someone who has not moved from bed in over a week make it to the window and jump from the fire escape? I thought you were going to help me die, Adam replied. I'm sorry I'm disappointing you, Danny answered. Now you know exactly how selfish I am. I'm sorry you're more valuable to me alive than dead.

Five days after coming home from the hospital, Adam died. In the afternoon he began to have respiratory problems. The nurse hooked him up to the oxygen tank which had been placed by his bed. By the time Danny arrived, around seven o'clock, Adam was semiconscious, lying on his back, gasping for breath, his arms twitching as if he were asking for help. Danny reached for Adam's hand, thinking he might calm him, but he was shocked that Adam's skin felt as cold and lifeless as vinyl, so Danny rubbed his hands along Adam's arms, hoping it would help the circulation. Thirty minutes later, when the gasping subsided, the nurse rolled Adam

over to rest on his side. She turned to Danny and said in a brisk whisper, Have any arrangements been made? Does he want last rites? Danny paced the floor till the breathing stopped.

The only time Danny cried was the day in the hospital when an orderly came into the room and shaved the hair on Adam's chest before the surgery to implant the catheter. John cried after his first visit to the hospital. Roy said he had cried while waiting in line to buy underwear. Cheryl cried when Adam called and said she could have the posters that hung over his desk. Wes said he cried in the steam room at the gym, when he knew no one was looking. Bob and Millie cried while having drinks together at the bar of a Japanese restaurant in the Village after they had tried to get Adam to eat the dinner Millie had brought. Elliot cried during the opening credits when *Auntie Mame* came on TV one night; he and Adam had seen it together on a double bill at the Regency. Steve didn't cry, or so he said, though Danny noticed he had started walking with his fists clenched.

In the hospital a doctor remarked to John that someone might carry this virus in his body for years before it began to deteriorate the immune system. Some people might not be affected at all. Danny turned to the doctor and replied rather sarcastically, Do you think we're all fools? We all know about this disease. Don't you know? Danny added. Haven't you heard? It's the fear every gay man carries today.

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The hardest thing, Danny said to John during the ride in the taxi, was carrying the ashes. Danny had picked them up yesterday from the funeral home. They had been placed inside a cardboard box, small and rectangular, and the man at the funeral home had placed the box in a plastic bag. When Danny took the bag, he was surprised it was so heavy for something that small, estimating the weight he held was almost ten pounds. As Danny walked back

to the apartment, the weight grew heavier; he couldn't shake the thought of what he carried.

John took the flowers to the kitchen of Wes's apartment, unwrapped them from the tissue, and arranged them in a tall glass vase. He carried them to the dining table and placed them at the center. Around him Roy, Millie, and Elliot took their seats. The extra leaf Wes had added to the table made the room seem smaller; the air was warm and perfumed by the ginger he had used in cooking. Bob dimmed the overhead light, Cheryl lit the candles with the matches she found in her purse, and Steve circled the table, pouring glasses of wine. Danny asked Wes if there was anything he could do to help: Give me something to do, Danny said. Bring these to the table, Wes answered, pointing at two steaming plates of food.

As Danny brought the plates from the kitchen he paused at the window, noticing the way the rain bent the branches of a tree toward the sidewalk. This afternoon Adam's mother had called him. She had found the portrait which had been painted of Adam eight years ago, the summer when Adam was twenty-four. She described the picture, the way the artist had overlapped a sequence of pale-blue and green strokes, like a camera out of focus, yet had remarkably managed to capture the dimples on the left side of his mouth when Adam tried to hold back a smile. Then she apologized for not mentioning at the funeral that, when she saw Adam the day before he died, he had said, I feel so ashamed that it has to end this way. They've made it so much easier for me, and I've only made it harder for them. You know he loved you very much, she said to Danny. He wanted you to have the portrait. I'll send it to you soon, she added, and then said goodbye.

Danny had done everything he knew how to do; why, then, did he feel that wasn't enough? He straightened his shoulders to release the strain from his back and then carried the plates to the table.

Winter Coats

All he wanted was to dance in a Broadway musical. And he had spent years taking lessons to train his body to do so: ballet, jazz, tap, voice, acting, and karate. When he was a child his mother made him costumes: a leprechaun, a cowboy, and once, even, a sequined jacket. By the time he was twenty-seven he had danced in four Broadway musicals—one, a revival, he had a featured solo in and toured with across the country. But it was off-off-Broadway that I first met Dennis; we were both appearing in a showcase of a new play. I was twenty-three and had just moved to New York City after graduating from college, trying to find myself a foothold in the theatre. Dennis was twenty-two and had finished appearing in his second Broadway musical. But what was notable about this production, besides introducing us, was that neither of us was required to sing or dance. We began as fully clothed characters who talked nonstop in foreign accents; by the end of the second act we were silent and had completely disrobed. Now, fourteen years later, pausing in front of a shelf of thick wool sweaters in a store that describes itself as the world's largest, I am baffled by the paradox of the present, that Dennis has asked me, after all these years, the man who had the chance to admire his nude body close-up for a two-week run, to help him pick out a coat to protect him against the winter weather.

I have always thought Dennis was handsome, even now, though he is thinner than when he danced on Broadway. Until last spring

he weighed 177 pounds, having built up his lissome frame in his early thirties by going to a gym. Now he lies and says he weighs 150. He is taller than me by two inches, five feet eleven, and he has light-olive skin and curly black hair, which he says his ancestors developed centuries ago in Greece. Yet, no matter how much or how little he has weighed, for as long as I have known him he has had a dancer's grace and poise; as he unfolds a blue cable sweater a salesman has handed him and holds it up in front of his chest, I notice his feet are placed perfectly in third position.

I started dancing late in life, though I had developed good coordination from sports—tennis, swimming, basketball, and baseball—abstaining from any sort of dance training because of the stigma attached to it in my small Missouri hometown. It was Dennis who took me to my first dance class, a month after that off-off-Broadway play closed. I remember, as I climbed the stairs to a third-floor studio and changed into a dance belt, tights, and T-shirt, how self-conscious I felt about it all, as though someone would approach me at any moment and say, with a laugh, "What do you think *you're* doing here?"

There were about twenty other men and women in this class, beginner's jazz, which Dennis had assured me was the easiest one in which to learn the basic movements. I was relieved when I noticed that most of these other students looked like they had just walked out from behind a desk—secretaries, brokers, receptionists, and accountants—though I could tell by their determined expressions, the steady concentration behind their eyes, that they dreamed of being actors or dancers. The teacher, a man wearing a scoop nylon shirt and a bandanna around his forehead, was a friend of Dennis', and together they led the group through a series of stretches and simple movements of body parts I would never have done alone, at home, in front of a mirror. But there, dwarfed in a cavernous room of arched windows overlooking the grimy buildings of Times Square, standing between these other nondancers, I didn't find the movements so awkward or suggestive. After all, I thought, I

am merely an actor trying to master another facet of his craft. Toward the end of the hour we did leaps diagonally, one at a time, across the room, then advanced to what was described as a pirouette, but what I discovered instead was a dizzy twirl, and finally a combination exercise of steps and lunges which we all tried to perform. I went back to the class several times, because I decided the conditioning was good, toning unused muscles of my body. Dennis was always there, and though I was never certain, I suspected that he and the teacher saw each other out of the classroom as well.

Dennis' strength was ballet, though he decided early on he would concentrate on jazz and tap, the road which at that time led to Broadway. Though his technique and training greatly surpassed mine, he would often stay after class and show me other steps. He would begin my tuition with the rigidity of an elderly ballet master, although, when I feigned awkwardness, my way of garnering more attention from him, he would become extraordinarily transformed into an eager boy showing a set of tricks to another. I watched him float through arabesques, glissades, brisés, and cabrioles while he showed me how to hold my arms, align my posture, and place my feet. Once, when I asked him to critique my series of jetés, he laughed and said, "You look as stiff as the marching brooms in *Fantasia*."

Since the day I first met Dennis he possessed a set of characteristics I admired and tried for years to perfect: a beautiful body; a calm, sensitive disposition; a gracious, congenial personality; and a sense of humor which could leap spontaneously between slapstick and a clever, dry wit. Though he looked as a dancer should—long graceful legs and lean willowy arms connecting to a slender frame at sharp, tight joints—he was not narcissistic, as dancers often are. He was raised in Connecticut, by parents who, he said, made sure he was well mannered and educated, and who brought him into the city for lessons and shows, recognizing his talent and passion to dance at an early age. In fact, I envied him,

not only on account of his good looks and commendable qualities, but because he always knew what he wanted and where he was headed. I have always been impatient, easily distracted, and try to avoid making any decisions at all. Often, I jump between an infatuation and a distaste for the theatre, racing to auditions only at the last possible moment.

Watching him now, as we ride the escalator up to the second floor of the department store, his hand placed against the rail as though he is about to begin a plié, I realize his decisions, his choices, his future were always directed by his body. On those days I watched him demonstrate a pirouette for me, he seemed exceedingly ethereal, as though unaware of the way women and men stared at him, some approaching with hope, wishing to charm and seduce him into their lives. Though he told me right off he had a preference for men, he detested the tiny, smoky bars of the Village and the trendy, crowded discos renovated from unused theatres and warehouses, places which never failed to lure and enchant me. I went to these places in search of attention and camaraderie. Later, as I became more addicted to Manhattan nightlife, I realized I used them as avenues for possible sex. Dennis had no such need for these places; as long as I have known him, he has never been at a loss for companions.

Dennis' first boyfriend I remember was the one who attended that off-off-Broadway play. His name was Brad or Chad or Tad or something like that, and I met him backstage in the small curtained space Dennis and I shared as a dressing room. I could tell Tad was the jealous type; he was extremely suspicious of me, and he stood with his fists clenched at his side next to Dennis, who was seated in front of a mirror, and began explaining why he didn't like the play, why he thought it was the wrong career move, why he felt Dennis should quit the production. Dennis' reactions were polite and controlled. Tad began working himself into a state near hysterics and I could feel him nervously glancing in my direction, willing me to leave before his anger erupted and he started a fight.

The one time I looked at the two of them, Tad was holding Dennis' shirt with both hands, and I noticed Tad's face had become red and his eyes were wide and almost popping out of his skull. By the end of the run, Tad was gone, never to be seen again.

There were others, too: a television writer, a travel agent, a paramedic, a Brazilian financial analyst, a fashion designer's assistant, and several actors and dancers, though Dennis often told me he preferred not to get involved with someone in the same profession as himself. And there was a period when I didn't see or hear much from him. He was touring across the country in a revival of a Broadway musical, though I remember he once called from Oklahoma City and left a message on my answering machine. He said as quickly as he could that he hated the production, he hated traveling, and he hated the company, though he was having an affair with the stage manager, but anticipated it would end by the time they reached Houston. When I replayed the message, there was no number left so I could call him back.

It was almost a year later when I ran into Dennis by chance on Columbus Avenue and met his new lover, Joel, a tall, attractive man with a bewitching smile and a repartee of double-entendres that kept Dennis grinning. Joel was about five years older than Dennis, and neither an actor nor a dancer but a lawyer who worked for legal-aid cases for the city. Dennis began calling me again shortly after our accidental meeting; Joel did not share his fondness for movies and needed to spend most of his free time researching cases. Joel was a workaholic and clearly not as possessive of Dennis as his previous lovers had been, which left Dennis and I plenty of time to rekindle our friendship by going together to the cinemas around Times Square. I remember, the first few times I met Dennis at Joel's West End Avenue apartment where Dennis had moved, how uncomfortable I was while Joel was around; my comments were stilted and simple, as though I were talking to a parent. Joel did his best to put me at ease with an amusing remark, whispering mischievous asides to me in a boyish manner when Dennis was

distracted or out of sight. After I got to know Joel better, I realized he respected the time Dennis and I spent together. He trusted Dennis as much as he trusted himself, and, in a somewhat ironic parental fashion, entrusted me with bringing Dennis safely back.

When we reach the coat department on the second floor I ask Dennis, "Want me to pick one out for you?"

Dennis slips easily out of his jacket. "No," he answers matter-of-factly. "You have lousy taste."

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Often the men I would meet and bring home from the bars or the gym were more stunning than the ones who latched on to Dennis. I have always been captivated by the beauty the male body could attain, perhaps the main reason I was first drawn to Dennis. That Dennis and I were never lovers, not even for a night, was not a mystery to either of us. Though I knew he was attracted to me, a fact I was intended to overhear when he announced it in a loud whisper to the director of that off-off-Broadway play, Dennis was the sort of guy who wanted a relationship with only one man at a time. I was more restless and adventurous. One night, backstage, I asked Dennis if he wanted to go out for a drink. "Only a drink," he answered. "Nothing else. I know your type. Who wants to wake up with a broken heart?" For years he would tease me about what he considered my major flaw: "Why is it that someone good looking and smart still thinks with the wrong head?"

Sometimes Dennis would ask for details of my encounters with other men, beginning with the opening lines of our introductions. And usually I would classify my experiences for him, whether the sex was good, average, awful, or incredible. And there was always some moment with a man which stuck in my mind, like a song you hear on the radio and like but of which you can only remember a hook or a phrase. And when I described this for Dennis, the way one man's buttocks were tight but pliable like firmly blown

balloons, or the way my fingers fit perfectly between the oblique muscles of another man's chest, he would become still and silent, his breathing short and heavy, as though enrapt in the viewing of a porno movie.

Since living with Joel, Dennis had never been unfaithful, nor, I imagined, had the desire to be crossed his mind. Joel had started spending more time with Dennis as his career became more prosperous and secure. Together they took trips to Mexico, Brazil, and Europe, redecorated their apartment, and began to arrange dinner parties. Often, on the nights when I would talk with them in their kitchen as they prepared an elaborate menu, I marveled at how they now fully complemented each other: one concentrating on the meat, the other on the salad, yet both of them alternating chopping onions, shredding carrots, peeling potatoes, or embellishing each other's remarks with specific details. I couldn't help being envious of their relationship, begun, as Dennis once told me, the same casual way I had approached other men, a look while passing on the street, followed by another look and then an introductory remark. My tricks this way, however, were simply enjoyed and devoured, disappearing as fast as Chinese takeout.

When he turned thirty Dennis announced he was stopping dancing. "I can't dance forever," he said somberly to me one day on the phone, by which I knew he meant his dancing had become painful. He had started seeing a therapist, having been sidelined with pulled tendons and muscles. "And I did what I wanted to do," he added, and then asked me if I wanted to start acting classes again. We took a class together at a studio in the West Village, even though I had had some moderate success performing in a repertory company and a string of television commercials. A few weeks later, when Dennis started to worry that his body would become lumpish and paunchy if he abandoned all exercise, I convinced him to take a membership at my gym.

At the gym Dennis was something of a minor celebrity; several men had seen him dance, others simply admired his body. I was

always awed by the sight of his body unclothed: tight and lean, his skin soft and luminescent as an unraveled bolt of silk. He seemed so youthful and innocent in the locker room of bodybuilders, and though he was constantly approached by men offering advice on how to broaden his shoulders, thicken his legs, and bulk up his chest, I think these men would have been happy just to take him home the way he was. Dennis easily became addicted to going to the gym; there he could stretch and work his muscles with confidence, without the fear they would be torn or damaged by performance. Sometimes he would go twice a day, first with Joel in the morning, then again in the evening with me. Once, when we stood side by side in front of the locker-room mirror in nothing but jockstraps, I noticed that his pencil shaped dancer's physique had been remodeled to the proportions of his athletic ancestors. I asked him how he thought I looked, and I knew, as he regarded my image in the mirror, he was trying to be both impartial and comic. "You have great triceps," he said. "Too bad mine don't look like that."

Now, standing in front of a mirror mounted to a column that rises to the ceiling of this floor of the department store, I watch Dennis, in a down-filled jacket, twist his waist first left, then right, studying the angles of the coat the way he once studied our bodies. He slips his hands into the pockets, hunches his shoulders, and pouts like a model, and then he bends his head down but lifts his eyes up, running his fingers through the strands of his thinning hair. Suddenly his face becomes pale and I notice his jaw clenching. He quickly removes the coat and hands it to me. "Bathroom," he says like a child with a limited vocabulary. I hastily rehang the coat and follow him up the escalator.

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Years ago I had a friend who used to cruise the fifth-floor men's restroom of this store. Today it is empty except for Dennis and

me. Dennis has thrown up twice and now stands in front of a sink, splashing water on his hands and face. When he finishes I hand him some paper towels and help him dry his neck.

"Okay?" he asks, as much a statement as a question, as though he had been waiting on me to leave. He grips my elbow with his left hand and leads me to the door, though I am not the one who needs to be supported.

Four months ago Dennis was hospitalized for pneumonia, brought on, he thinks, by the sudden chill of turning on an air conditioner to dispel the summer heat. He has known for ten months he has carried a virus within his body that is slowly, deliberately, destroying his immune system. For a while he neglected his diagnosis, or at least avoided thinking about it. Joel was also sick, having been diagnosed a year and a half before. Joel's first symptoms were swollen lymph glands, low fevers in the afternoons, heavy sweating at night, and constant exhaustion, attributed, he said, to his mounting work load. After Joel was hospitalized with pneumonia, he started Bactrim, had a bad reaction, and then switched to pentamidine, which caused him to develop scaly rashes and diabetes. Dennis stopped going to the gym, acting classes, or auditions and turned down a role in a daytime soap opera to stay home and take care of Joel. Joel, however, kept working as much as possible—half days at the office, a few hours at home—but his anxiety over working, his anger over his illness, his terror of dying, and his fear of losing Dennis only made him grow worse.

Joel was not the first person I knew to become sick from this virus, nor the first I knew who had died. Though I had watched a friend lying helpless in a hospital bed slip from semiconsciousness into a coma, and Dennis knew a dancer who had leapt from the ninth-floor terrace of his apartment, our first acknowledgment to each other of our fear of this disease was at a Village café one night in a brief, apologetic conversation, questioning each other on the practice of safe sex. Yet, as other friends became sick, the

shock of their deaths, the huge number of those infected, and the predictions for the future left us absurdly inarticulate with each other. The afternoon I met Dennis at a cinema on the East Side and noticed his posture was less than perfect, his steps were sluggish and his speech was slurred, I knew, before even asking, that something was now happening either to himself or to Joel.

Once Dennis told me Joel's illness was the most difficult and the most intimate period of their relationship. He felt strong being able to take care of Joel, helping negotiate the labyrinth of doctors, medications, and problems. He arranged a support system of friends for shopping, cleaning, cooking, and taking Joel to the doctor. He kept abreast of the latest treatments and therapies, medical and homeopathic, and together they experimented with meditation and visualization. At night, before going to sleep, Dennis would make Joel list the things that were bothering or depressing him, so Dennis would know—could try—to make Joel's time more comfortable. Dennis was able, as if by instinct, to know when Joel was holding something back. Often he could finish Joel's thought before it was spoken. Over a period of almost two years, Joel battled pneumonia five times. A month after Joel's funeral, Dennis was in the hospital.

Now, thirty-eight pounds thinner, his hairline receding, his olive skin ashen, his eyes hollowed, darkened, by medication and grief, Dennis has entrusted his security to me and a new winter coat. He tries on a denim jacket, and though I think it looks good on him, he is able to read my thought that it will not offer much warmth.

"I just wanted to see what it looked like on," he says, his eyes widening as he looks at himself in the mirror.

Together we sort through the racks and he tries on a wool knee-length topcoat, gray and businesslike, and then a bright-red cotton ski jacket which has zippers on the sleeves. Even though Dennis knows I detest department stores—even the thought of shopping—over the years of our friendship I have helped him pick

out a microwave oven, a video-cassette player, several swimsuits, and Christmas presents for Joel. Dennis likes to look at all the alternatives before making a purchase. Normally I have little tolerance for such methods; I usually know what I want before I ever enter a store. Once, several years ago, Dennis and I had our one and only fight over some shirts I had rushed him into purchasing. When he got home and found they were long-sleeve instead of short, he called and demanded I pick them up immediately from his apartment and return them to the store.

Today I do not rush him. In fact, I point out other styles, other colors for him to try. Watching him change coats, I am again reminded of how our relationship has changed. In the last three months I have sublet my apartment in the East Village and moved in with Dennis, and together we have started him on a macrobiotic diet he had heard was successful. My last acting job, five weeks ago, was a day's work in a music video; I have told my agent the only work I can now accept must be short-term, and with the understanding I might have to cancel. When I'm not running errands, the remainder of my time is spent with Dennis. My greatest fear for now is that he will lose his will, his desire, to live.

Dennis slips on a goose-down-filled parka, dark-green cotton, with a detachable hood which dangles across the width of his back. An elderly woman, nearby with her husband, catches Dennis' reflection, smiles, and nods.

"It does look good," I say.

"Sold," he says, laughing, and turns to me. "Now it's your turn." He weaves through the aisle, stopping in front of a display of leather jackets so expensive they are chained to the rack. I shake my head but, before I can say "No," Dennis has lifted one up for my approval.

"Don't worry," he says, inspecting the price tag. "I know you can afford it."

❍

When Joel died he left Dennis everything he had: his books, records, furniture, clothing, the West Side co-op, stocks, and a sizable life-insurance benefit. Joel's family had been well off; plans for his parents' retirement, medical benefits, and financial needs had been made many years ago. As Joel explained to Dennis before he died, his parents didn't need the money, and his sister and her two children were provided for by her husband. "Besides, I want Dennis to have everything," Joel said to me one night at the hospital. "After all," he added with a wry smile, "it's the least he should get for putting up with me for eight years."

As the beneficiary of Joel's will, and through Joel's system of setting up joint accounts and living trusts, Dennis has more money than he desires to spend. Though Joel did not know about Dennis' own illness until a month before he died, he suspected that Dennis, too, would become ill. He arranged complete medical insurance and a disability plan for Dennis, both of which now pay his bills and provide additional income. This morning Dennis asked me to hire a car and a driver to escort us around town; his request, I know, was intended to give our outing more ease, not propelled by whimsy or extravagance.

"I've been lucky," Dennis said as we rode downtown to go shopping. And I know he didn't mean his new, sudden wealth. He was feeling good; we had just left the doctor, who had told Dennis his T-cell count had stabilized and had written him a prescription to relieve the nausea. "I've loved and been loved," Dennis added with a wistful laugh, and stretched his legs out fully before him. "What more could I want except a little more health? There are people who have it worse off than me."

"Someone's going to be very rich when all this is over," he continued. "There's a pot of gold at the end of the storm." I offered no comment and turned my head away from him to look out at the street: signs, stores, and strollers whirling past my vision. He knew this was a subject I refused to discuss with him. Dennis has begun putting his money into joint accounts and living trusts, as

Joel did before him, only this time the other name is mine. I told him I didn't want it, didn't need it; it should be given to charities or organizations that can use the funds and the help. Money can't buy for him, for me, what I want. It cannot buy time: past, present, or future. I can't purchase Dennis' health, Joel's life back, or something to erase my own fear of dying. "You don't have to use it if you don't want to," Dennis said when he told me of his plan. "But it's there if you want it." Security, as it were, like a winter coat.

Despite my objections, Dennis has purchased a leather jacket for me. Though he has enough money with him to pay in cash, he paid for both coats on his credit card. His reasoning is one Joel taught him shortly before he died: no one is responsible for a dead man's debts. Now the coats have been folded and placed into two large shopping bags, which I swerve either in front or in back of me to avoid hitting people as we travel across the main floor. Suddenly the store has become busy. Dennis walks ahead of me, sidestepping around the shoppers streaming in through the revolving door.

The car is waiting for us at the corner. Outside, I am momentarily confused by the bright October light, and, jostled by the crowd, I lose sight of Dennis. It is a crisp, clear autumn day, the air so light, so buoyant, not even the swarm of shoppers can agitate me. When I spot Dennis he is standing on the curb near the car. As I approach him he observes, just as I do, a street sign that reads "Broadway." And then there is a moment so private, so personal, it is priceless. Dennis smiles, making sure I notice, straightens his posture, and springs quickly from flexed knees to the balls of his feet. Effortlessly, gracefully, he spins through a double pirouette. I could never do even one without losing my balance. And then he is gone, dancing out of sight behind the opened door of the car.

Dancing on the Moon

Music bled through the walls like an amplified heartbeat. Eddie was outside, on the deck of the Pavilion, the palms of his hands flat against the wood railing as he leaned into the warm summer night. He rocked lightly back and forth on the heels of his feet, trying to bridge the sounds of a syncopated drum to the constant whispering rhythm of the Atlantic waves. He stopped when he noticed Bill was beside him, his figure eclipsing a portion of the full moon.

"I thought you wanted to stay," Eddie said, and felt a breeze rise and slip between them.

"Not really," Bill answered, and ran his hand through his hair, fingering the blond strands which the wind had blown across his eyes.

Bill turned and Eddie followed, weaving through a group of brightly dressed men. A flash of blue light blinked through the door of the disco as Eddie passed by, making his white cotton shirt glow as though he had slipped in front of an ultraviolet beam. In the darkness of the stairway, Eddie lost sight of Bill, and he hurried down the stairs two steps at a time. On the boardwalk, he quickened his pace, conscious of the way the planks of wood shifted beneath his feet and added a bounce to his steps. It gave him an odd feeling, he thought, part delight, part discontent, like a young boy dragging a balloon home before the circus had left town.

"Let's take the beach back," Eddie said when he had caught up with Bill.

Bill nodded and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

At the intersection of two lanes they drifted to the left, traveling between houses perched on stilts above the sand. The boardwalk dipped and climbed a dune. Eddie's heart jumped as the ocean came into view and the moon slid across the top of the water. Bill said nothing but bent his head toward Eddie, as though waiting for him to speak. Eddie remained silent but shifted his shoulders slightly, continuing his pace and staring straight ahead.

Eddie had thought about the beach all week; in August the city was muggy and oppressive. He could never reach work without becoming drenched in sweat, and the drone of the air conditioner in his office sent him home with headaches. Bill had hesitated about leaving the city, but Eddie explained there would be plenty of distractions: they could spend the afternoon on the beach or take a walk to the Grove, in the evening there was Tom and Allan's party, and afterward, if they didn't want to go dancing, they could always stay in and watch a movie. On the ferry across the bay Eddie carried a bag of books he had bought the night before, when he had wondered what they should do if it rained. Bill held another bag, which contained boxes of games: Monopoly, Scrabble, and Trivial Pursuit.

Eddie stumbled on a board and stopped, momentarily confused by the way the moonlight brightened some planks and left others gray or completely lost in shadows. Bill paused in front of him. The moon was straight ahead. It reminded Eddie of a volleyball, and all he had to do was play the game. Push the ball over the net. Bill would turn around and hit it back into the air.

That's what they had done at the beach today. They had played the games. Not just volleyball and Frisbee, but also the game of observation, a game that demanded little concentration, just a pair of roving eyes to watch the parade of men in front of the water.

The ocean was as still as a pond, the surf only a few inches high, and beneath a cloudless, Crayola-blue sky the sand was covered with bodies, stripped and simmering under the sun. This was why they came here every summer, Eddie told himself when he lay on an oversized towel, the smells of suntan lotion, salt water, and sweat rippling together in the air above him. On the radio Eddie had heard that tomorrow the weather would be just as wonderful. He was glad. It seemed to infuse everyone with a tranquil energy, suspending for a while any pressure or trouble.

When the boardwalk ended, Eddie sat on the top step and unlaced his sneakers, noticing the way the moonlight magically made the dark hair on his arm seem blond. Bill stood on one leg and then on the other, leaning and pulling his shoes off with ease, then tying the laces together through a belt loop of his jeans so that the shoes dangled freely just below his hip.

On the beach the sand felt surprisingly chilly, and Eddie squeezed and curled his toes for warmth as he walked. Carrying a sneaker in the palm of each hand, he outspread his arms and waved them from side to side as though treading a tightrope. Finally, he felt released from the anxiety he had carried all day. This summer, with Mike's absence, Eddie felt the need to have plans. Mike had always made the summers seem spontaneous, collecting invitations to parties the way a child gathered sea shells. Earlier this evening, Eddie and Bill had gone to Tom and Allan's party. Eddie knew it wouldn't be the type of party Bill used to work at as a bartender in the city. It wouldn't be like the legendary Fire Island parties either, the ones with suggestions to come in red, come in white, or maybe leather. There wouldn't be any bartenders or costumes at this party. Tom and Allan had just returned from Paris, and the party was planned as a simple dinner for friends.

Eddie had been concerned that the party might be uncomfortable for everyone. Tom and Allan had not been at the beach this afternoon. Before they left two weeks ago for Paris, Allan had noticed a small spot on his neck and a doctor had diagnosed

it as Kaposi's sarcoma. It seemed an awkward time to give a party, though Eddie was grateful for the opportunity to be together. It gave them something to do, a place to be, a chance to lend each other support in a subtle, unspoken way. Tom and Allan had decorated their house with paper lanterns and jasmine-scented candles, and served pasta with artichokes, grilled swordfish, and a frozen cappuccino soufflé to twelve friends. Bill showed Tom how to make blue margaritas, and Allan passed around photos he had taken from the top of the Eiffel Tower. Eddie tried to stay in constant motion, circulating through the room with napkins, plates, and buckets of ice, aware that Bill was scrutinizing his every move. During dinner, Allan said Paris was as romantic as he had envisioned: the cafés, the museums, especially the boat ride along the Seine. Eddie decided the party must have been Tom's suggestion, just as the impromptu trip to Paris had been.

Afterward, while Eddie was helping Allan wash the dishes in the kitchen and Bill and Tom were cleaning the living room, a song came on a tape Tom had made three years ago. It was the Supremes singing "Where Did Our Love Go?" Eddie became nervous and walked to the door that separated the rooms. Tom seemed frozen to the floor, unable to move, but when Bill started rocking his legs back and forth in time to the music, Tom relaxed and joined in. Watching them made Eddie achingly miss Mike. Mike would have stopped everything, walked to the center of the room, and matched his lips to Diana's voice, swinging his arms in all directions as if he had actually practiced the choreography. It was Mike who had said Allan would settle down. Eventually. We all went through that stage. But it was Eddie who had suffered through Allan's turbulent period. Allan got hooked on coke and started tricking with guys for money. Eddie often wondered if he had ever really had a relationship with Allan, or had it been just an affair that lasted too long? It was ironic, Eddie thought, that it was Allan who had kept the relationship going with Tom for over three years while Eddie had passed through a succession of beds.

Eddie stared at the moon, half expecting it to suddenly spin and twirl in the sky like a spotlight in a disco. He paused and asked Bill how he thought Tom and Allan had looked tonight. "All right," Bill said, easing onto the strip of hard, wet sand. Eddie made a series of large, brisk strides until he was once again beside Bill. Eddie thought Allan had looked great; the face that had intrigued a city of men seemed untouched. It was Tom who looked tired and troubled.

Even if Bill had detected a change, Eddie knew Bill would not acknowledge it. It was what he had done with Mike. Eddie had never seen Bill cry about Mike, though he knew Bill was not cold and indifferent. Some people reacted differently, even if it was a refusal to react at all. Eddie had always felt Bill held too much inside; now, at the slightest hint of sympathy, Bill would tense and walk away. Eddie believed Bill felt responsible for Mike's death. Bill had slept with other men. But so had Mike. Eddie remembered Bill at the hospital, struggling to lift Mike's spirits, hoping to squeeze a laugh out of him by doing something silly, like pinning flowers and fruit to a towel and wrapping it around his head, dancing about the room like Carmen Miranda, never once admitting the possibility of death. When Mike died, Bill was leaning against the edge of the hospital bed, drawing a clown's face on a white sock. Eddie had sat staring at an arrangement of daisies, trying to contain his horror.

Bill stopped and stretched, pressing his hands against his lower back and arching his chest toward the sky, a habit Eddie had noticed Bill had started, to release the stress. The sound of laughter floated from the direction of a house and Eddie turned and glimpsed two figures emerge through a door, their T-shirts and sneakers disappearing quickly into the night. The tragic mistake, Eddie decided, was that a stranger would still question their lives. Why were they still giving parties? Why were they still dancing? Wouldn't fear make them reclusive? Eddie would answer that they wanted to be together. They *had* to be together. And though the

wild, campy times had become wary and reserved, Eddie was thankful just to be alive and worried. Bill cut across the sand toward a path through the dunes. Before they reached the house, Eddie asked Bill if Tom had hinted whether Allan had started treatments. "No," Bill answered. "And I didn't want to ask."

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Mike had been adamant about the beauty of certain things: the symmetry of a physique, the color of a cocktail, the way the summer sun, setting, polished the landscape with amber. Every summer, Mike had led them to tea dance at the bar in the harbor, where beauty assembled its pieces together into a late-afternoon puzzle. This afternoon, there were faces Eddie had never seen in the ten years he had been coming to the Pines, but that wasn't what pleased him. It was the ones that had returned. Eddie was relieved to recognize a familiar face. Eddie and Bill had lingered longer than they had anticipated, talking with Wayne, a friend of Eddie's from his first summer on Fire Island, who had traveled all the way from Minnesota just to spend the weekend.

"This is what I remember most," Wayne had said, and lifted his drink as though proclaiming a toast. "All the beautiful boys with reflections in their eyes."

"It must be tough to be young and pretty today," Eddie said.

"Look but don't touch," Wayne added.

"Touch but don't feel," Bill said.

"We were like that," Wayne said.

"Tough? Young? Or pretty?" Bill asked.

"All of the above," Wayne answered.

"Is it harder for them or harder for us?" Eddie questioned.

"Look at that one," Wayne said, tipping his chin toward a young man wearing a tank top.

Eddie turned and studied the dark, exotic youth. Years ago, Mike would have leaned close to Eddie and whispered some piece

of gossip, something like, "He was the one last night in nothing but feathers," or, "I heard be spent the entire afternoon in the dunes." Those first summers, Eddie had been obsessed with sex. He had had sex on the beach, beside pools, and underneath the moon. Sex before parties, after dancing, between sheets sprinkled with fine grains of sand. Was what he had done, he thought now, more reckless than what two teenagers did on a dark suburban street in the back seat of a car?

Eddie glanced around the room of men, suddenly aware of how time had passed. Should he feel guilty today about a virus that years ago he hadn't known to exist? Had his terror created an absurd game of guessing: who has it, who doesn't, which one of us is going to go next?

Wayne nudged Eddie in the side as the dark young man moved to another spot. "Do you realize," Wayne said when the youth had disappeared, "you've probably already had him? If you slept with one of us, you've slept with all of us."

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Bill and Mike and Tom and Allan were Eddie's closest friends. At some point, for some time, if only just a night, each of them had been his lover. It was sex that had introduced them and kept them together. Eddie and Mike had been best friends since college. Together, they had owned a graphic-design company in Greenwich Village. Eddie and Tom had met at a gym in Chelsea, but it was Mike who had introduced Eddie to Allan in the lobby of the Met. Eddie, in turn, had introduced Allan to Tom. Eddie and Bill had met at a party where Bill was a bartender. Mike had met Bill when he went to a bar with Eddie. Bill and Mike had been lovers for seven years. Sometimes Bill said it was Eddie who had kept Bill and Mike together for so long. Eddie had not only solved every business crisis but had exposed the frustrations of one-night stands. It angered Eddie that Bill might think that way,

as though Eddie's success in business and casualness with lovers had produced a life less fulfilling than Bill's. Or was it that Bill felt it should have been Eddie who was sick, that the wrong person had grabbed a seat in a bizarre round of musical chairs? Certainly Bill must realize that no one understood exactly what was happening. One unexpected death did not diminish the probability of another. Wayne had even mentioned this afternoon that there was still the likelihood that any of them could develop a regular disease, something like diabetes or meningitis.

"Okay?" Bill asked. They were back at the house.

Eddie nodded. He was standing at the glass doors which led to a deck and the beach and the black waves lapping ashore. In the reflections of the glass Eddie thought his eyes looked puffy and dull, as though he had drank too much or had taken too many drugs. Eddie felt the pressure of perspiration thickening the pores of his brow. This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. In spite of their perplexing behavior, or, maybe, because of it, Eddie knew he and Bill had fallen in love. But it was impossible to remove Mike from the picture. Afraid of crying, Eddie walked toward the kitchen without saying a word.

Lately, when Eddie was depressed, Bill had been unable to provide the humor he had administered to Mike. All Bill could offer, Eddie knew, was his refusal to leave Eddie alone. Bill would follow Eddie, watching every move, waiting for the anguish to erupt. Sometimes Eddie felt Bill wanted him to cry—that his display of emotion would preclude any from Bill. Yet, if Eddie tried to touch or comfort Bill, Bill would back away, shake his head, or leave the room. The aftershock of Mike's death had produced a curious alliance between them. In the last two weeks, Bill had moved into Eddie's apartment in the city and Eddie had sold the business and started a new job uptown at an advertising firm. Now Eddie had learned to accept Bill's presence as if he were a shadow. But he was also aware that Bill was afraid of being alone.

Eddie drank a glass of water in front of the kitchen sink, and

then, impulsively, slipped his head beneath the faucet of cold water. He shivered and grabbed a dish towel and dried his face and hair. Walking into the hall, he imagined a breeze wandering through the house like a ghost, even before he discovered the glass doors were open.

Bill was outside, on the deck, in one of the canvas chairs, reclined as though he were trying to darken his tan. He had undressed to his underwear. His eyes were closed. Eddie thought about placing his hands on Bill's shoulders, gently massaging the sleep away. But Eddie was still uncertain Bill would allow even such a simple touch. It was odd, Eddie knew, how much they needed each other, how much they cared, deeply, for one another, yet, since Mike's funeral seven months ago, nothing physical between them had transpired. Eddie went inside and found a large red beach towel and went back outside and draped it over Bill. He sat on the top step that led to the beach and pulled his legs up against his chest, clasping his arms around them and rocking his body slowly back and forth.

This afternoon, on the beach, Eddie had been startled by a woman standing in front of him. She wore a floppy wide-brimmed hat and a baggy, pale-blue sundress, and as she spread her legs apart on the sand and crouched, the hem of her dress dangled beneath her ankles, blackening as it began to soak up water. She raised a camera to her face and leaned toward the ocean. Bill had been swimming and was approaching in her direction, his long, firm legs leaving behind a trail of salty white foam. Bill lifted his hands to his forehead and pushed the wet hair away from his eyes, unaware of the woman focusing on him. Eddie had wondered what the woman hoped to capture. Was it the way Bill's body, sturdy and defined as a gymnast's, glistened with water as though painted with oil? Or was it the way he moved, graceful and calm, nothing to indicate that the slightest movement could be too painful to perform?

The waves continued, rising and falling like sleeping breaths.

The evening air flapped through Eddie's shirt. Eddie doubted the weather tomorrow could be the same. Nothing is ever the same, he decided. Every wave moved closer or farther than the one before. He was thirty-six years old and had not had sex in over a year. Yet it was still hard for him to believe this was the summer of 1985 and four friends were already dead, another was in the hospital, and three more had been diagnosed. When would this nightmare end?

Eddie tilted his head toward the moon. Would a stranger confuse Bill's repose and Eddie's rocking for exhaustion and intemperance? The consequence and reparation of lives too extreme? Would a stranger understand their lives, or were they still full of misconceptions? Having been there, having seen them at the bars, the gyms, the baths, the discos, the beaches, would a stranger understand the unbearable sorrow which had punctured their souls so profoundly it was now granted the same recognition as the sound of waves crashing against the sand? Wayne had mentioned at tea dance that life in Minnesota still seemed mild compared with all this activity. "No one out there has a clue as to what our lives are like," he said to Eddie. "They think we haven't changed a bit. All this is as strange to them as dancing on the moon."

A young man strolling home alone on the beach as the sun is beginning to rise, the music from the Pavilion still pulsing in his blood, would notice Eddie and Bill on the deck. The young man would not wonder. He would know. These were not giant leaps but cautious steps, one foot carefully placed in front of the other.

Ghosts

When I first met Scott he was waiting to see the doctor, waiting to be injected with ribavirin.

"The first week was awful," he told me that day. "I was getting worse. I was constantly coughing and running a fever. Then I started getting better. I've really stabilized."

I am not surprised that now, almost a year later as I sit on the deck of a boat which is harbored by the pier, I can recall the images so vividly from that day. Scott was seated in the stark white waiting room, dressed in faded jeans and a faded red T-shirt which approached the color pink, and the dark-black letters that had once vividly spelled PARADISE across his chest had cracked and dissolved into gray. His body, which was trim and well defined, leaned in my direction, and he spoke in a voice I found remarkably calm. I did not imagine him sick; his complexion was exceptionally clear and showed no sign of illness or even aging. He had a face somewhere between handsome and pretty, soft green eyes and a thin, long-lipped mouth which had broken into an alluring smile when he spoke his name. It was a face I felt belonged in a magazine, with a slender, unmarked nose, a solid, square-cut chin, and sandy-brown hair which was long and straight except where it had been cropped razor-short at the sides, and which shimmered blond when he tilted his head back into the light. But it was his winsome manner that made him seem so relaxed, levelheaded, not pointed toward panic. What I am surprised at now is that I

can recall with equal clarity the emotions which pulled me toward Scott, feelings that stretched beyond any motivation of desire. It was the thought that here we were, two young, metropolitan males, suddenly rendered helpless by the science of our bodies. And it was this helplessness that introduced us to each other and kept us talking while we waited for answers.

"I'm not on a research program," Scott had said. "I had to go to Mexico to get it," he added, and began to explain his trip. I listened to him tell the story of a Mexican pharmacist who had agreed to sell him a larger quantity of the drug than was permitted, and how he had smuggled the excess across the border in an empty shampoo bottle.

I cannot remember what amazed me more, the fact that we had begun talking so easily and quickly, as though we were old friends, or my realization that, even though Scott was sick from a virus that terrified me, I still felt an attraction to him. But I do remember I was astonished, even elated, that in spite of the aura cast by this disease, the power of attraction to another man had not diminished.

"I can't begin to tell you how many doctors I have now or have had, in all meanings of the phrase," Scott said, his eyes brightening. "And you?"

"I hope it's just an allergy," I said, and noticed Scott did not react to my expectation that I was healthy. I explained I was here at the insistence of my lover, Ben, who three weeks ago had adopted a puppy, a collie which he had named Battello. I told him I had been allergic to dogs for many years, since the death of my first dog, a cocker spaniel I had named Pensacola because I had wanted to be anywhere except the hot rural town in the middle of Alabama which my parents called my home. I told Scott that Cola, as I came to call her, had been my companion for twelve years and had stayed at my side as I grew into my teens, and that when she died I had become so distraught my parents had gotten another dog immediately, which I rejected just as quickly by developing

a rash. Last week Ben had seen the doctor about an allergy. Two days ago I started itching and a rash had started beneath my arm. I told Scott I was here because Ben wanted me to have a checkup and get a prescription so we would not have to give Battello away. "He's grown so attached to him," I said to Scott. "He even sleeps in bed with us."

When the nurse called his name, Scott stood and offered his hand. I shook it and said I was glad we had met and, since I had not lived in the city for long, it was nice to find someone friendly. Scott said he was listed in the phone book, if I ever wanted to call, and we stood in front of each other, smiling awkwardly. Before he turned to leave I said that I hoped we might run into each other again, that I did not have many friends outside of the ones my lover knew.

"Hope," he replied before disappearing through the door. "It's such a wonderful word."

Now, looking back on the events of that day, I realize something extraordinary happened that afternoon in the waiting room. For a moment, only a very brief moment, I had been suspended in the space between sex and death.

❍

"Remove your clothes," the nurse said, pointing to a set of hooks and hangers, when I had followed her into the examination room. "And slip this on," she added, placing a white hospital gown onto the examination table and leaving the room.

Though the room was chilly and smelled strongly of antiseptic, I remember I wasn't anxious or worried as I waited for the doctor. But when the doctor entered the room I was shocked at how unpleasant he looked. He was an extremely overweight and balding young man, with dark, beady eyes and a tiny gold-stud earring in his left ear, not at all my image of how a doctor should appear.

I sat on top of the examination table and described, in a series of broken, breathless phrases, the rash which was beginning

underneath my right arm. The doctor first checked my pulse and heartbeat, touching my arm and chest, I thought, a bit too suggestively, before slipping the gown off my shoulder and examining the rash.

He began to ask me a series of questions: "Are you diabetic? Are you constipated? Have you had a lot of headaches or fevers recently? Have you been under a lot of stress?"—the last of which I answered with an uneasy "Yes," explaining I had just moved to San Francisco from Manhattan, had recently started a new job, gotten a new dog, and had just become involved in a relationship with Ben, who had recently seen the doctor.

"Ah yes, Ben," the doctor said, and wrote furiously on a notepad. I was alarmed at the tone of his voice and I flushed, feeling embarrassed as an eruption of sweat began across my forehead. He took my temperature and began feeling the glands in my neck, armpits, and groin.

I remember thinking as he continued touching me that something awful was happening, that something was seriously wrong. I remember the future shriveling up, disappearing instantly from my vision; everything I had ever planned or wanted to do, to learn, to see suddenly seemed not possible. I wouldn't be able to meet Ben's friends for dinner this weekend. I wouldn't make it to the symphony tomorrow night. And then what worried me most was, I might not even make it home to see Ben again. I was sure an ambulance was already on its way to whisk me to the hospital. Panicking, I began to breathe rapidly.

"I'm going to give you a prescription for an ointment," the doctor said, returning to his notepad. "Rub it on once a day, after showering, and have this other prescription filled. Take the tablets three times a day, as directed."

"It's just a rash?" I asked, somewhat confused.

"Just a rash. Probably an allergic reaction. It could be from a new type of soap you've used, deodorant, detergent, maybe clothing or some sort of food. Maybe the dog. And it may be aggravated by

stress, a new environment, changes in temperature. Allergy tests are complicated and expensive. Sometimes the problem clears of itself. Stay away from dairy products for a week, and be sure to drink plenty of water. If it's not better in two weeks, call for another appointment."

I felt momentarily relieved, until the doctor cleared his throat, slumped his shoulders forward, and started talking again.

"I'm advising all of my patients to have blood tests done. The results would remain anonymous and confidential."

I knew immediately what he was suggesting. I stared at the doctor in horror.

"It's not mandatory," he said. "It's your decision."

"Do you mean I have it?" The words choked at the back of my throat.

"No, no. Not at all. Only that you're in a high-risk category. And whatever the result, we can establish a base for monitoring any changes. Think it over for a few minutes. I'll get the nurse to bring you some pamphlets describing the test. Read them, and I'll be back in a few minutes."

As I watched him leave the room I felt a startled anger rise within me. Did the doctor think I was ignorant? I knew the statistics. I knew the number infected was staggering. I had friends who had died, others who were sick. Only a few minutes earlier I had talked about this very thing in this doctor's waiting room with Scott. And then it seemed as if every man I had ever known was sitting beside me in this room, worried, suspicious, and scared. I knew I wasn't ready to take this test. I was scared of the result. And what of Ben? I felt this was something I needed, *wanted* to discuss with Ben first.

No, I decided, my heart hammering the ribs of my chest like a fist. Not now. Not yet. I needed some time to think. I jumped off the edge of the examination table and hurriedly dressed, shaking my head as I passed the nurse in the hall. On the sidewalk, I couldn't control the weakness in my legs, my body wavering as though I

had just landed after a stormy cruise at sea. I sat down on the curb and bent my head between my legs, hoping to arrest the feeling of nausea, trying to calm myself by repeating the doctor's original diagnosis in my brain: "Just a rash, just a rash." But as I began to feel better I could not forget the terror the doctor had instilled, that something dangerous and uncontrollable could possibly be lurking unknown, hidden somewhere inside my body. Even though I had known all along it was possible. I had known for years that who I was put me at risk.

❍

It was Mark who first tried to set things right, put things in perspective. He was standing over the stove in the kitchen of his apartment, vigorously stirring the steaming vegetables in a wok.

"Therapy won't help you unless you tell yourself you're ready to be helped," he said.

I was seated at a small table for two in the corner of the kitchen, not listening to anything Mark was saying, just running my fingers across the plastic red-and-white checked tablecloth and watching the hem of Mark's linen shirt float around his waist as he darted between the stove, the sink, and the cupboards. Maggie, Mark's rangy yellow cat, jumped up off the floor and into my lap and pawed at my thighs before deciding to rest.

"What you have to do is understand why it happened," Mark broke his concentration from the vegetables and looked at me. "Once you come to terms with that, you can move on to other points."

It had been four days since my visit to the doctor. But Mark was talking about my lover, Ben, who had been dead exactly four days. Mark and Ben had been best friends for sixteen years, but I had known Mark for only a little over six months. "He's reformed," is the way Ben had described Mark before I ever met him, which meant that Mark had reacted to the possibility of becoming ill, as

Ben explained, in a slightly obsessive way. Mark was an investment banker, and a rather handsome one at that, who had spent several years developing a striking physique. He had deep-brown eyes, a thick, dark moustache, and wavy black hair which not only covered the top of his head but was dispersed across his entire massive frame. He had a closet full of pin-striped suits and starched white shirts, but in the days before his reformation he had whirled through the streets of San Francisco in jeans, a flannel shirt, and a flight jacket. Now Mark remained at home, romping in his kitchen in linen shirts, learning macrobiotic cooking, and limiting his social life to a small circle of friends.

"Not in here you don't, baby," Mark had said, slapping Ben's hand, the first night I met Mark. We were at his apartment, squeezed three at the table for two, and Ben was about to light a cigarette. "I don't understand people who still smoke, drink, do drugs, or eat whatever they want," Mark had ranted. "They are only getting closer to death. They don't honestly cherish their lives."

"Listen to the Queen of the Quickies." Ben grinned. "Your kingdom used to be the trash heap, as I recall."

"It's true," Mark said, and turned to me. "I was driven by obsession. But if you recall, my dear Ben," and he turned to Ben, "I was always one who gorged, then purged."

"Stuff the cream puffs, then vomit." Ben laughed.

"Terrible." Mark rocked his head back and forth and smiled. "I was compelled."

"Mark once had five different men in one night," Ben remarked. "And each of them walked away satisfied."

"It was four, and a jerk behind the Troc," Mark corrected.

The night it was just the two of us, the cat, and the steaming vegetables, Mark defended his current preoccupation. "It's not just a diet. It's a way of looking at life. It's getting into tune with things."

Now is hardly the time to be cleaning up your act," Ben had yelled a few weeks before at Mark, when he thought the obsessiveness was becoming, well, too obsessive.

"I should have been like this before," Mark said to me. "I only hope it doesn't catch up with me." Maggie the cat leapt from my lap and raced toward the window, curious about the sound of voices which drifted up from the sidewalk. Mark placed a bowl of bean soup on the table.

"I miss him," Mark confessed to me when he returned to the table with bowls of brown rice and vegetables. "I wish I knew why I'm doing so well. I'm going to be the last living clone."

❍

I was not prepared for Ben's death. Often, as I think of him now, I am overcome by a weightless trance, a lightness of sensation, as if I have been lifted off the ground and suspended in midair. I think, perhaps, that has a lot to do with the way I remember Ben and I made love together. Ben's hands, long and slender, were always in constant motion. Our first nights in bed, as we explored and touched and studied one another, I remember his hands shifting and rolling and spinning our bodies together as though we were creating some sort of new, magical dance.

Ben had the capacity to make me feel as if I had been the only man who had ever existed in his life, or that anyone who came before me never really mattered or had amounted to much. I remember how he would sleep beside me in bed, his head pressed against my neck, the moisture from his breath warming my skin. I remember the way his body would sometimes surprisingly envelop mine in the middle of the night. I remember how he would take his hand and cup my chin, tilt my head until my eyes met his, and then smile and draw us together into a kiss. Ben made me feel special and significant, in much more than just sexual ways. I remember how he would watch me in a crowded room, the way he would refer to me in a conversation, the ease with which he introduced me to his friends. I remember the way he would wait for me outside of the building where I worked, the way his voice

sounded as we walked home to our apartment. And I remember the nights when we would be visiting Mark, how Ben would slip his arm around my shoulders and listen to my opinions or my stories, even though he had heard them all a dozen times before.

Sometimes I feel it is hard to explain my connection to Ben. Though we were physically dissimilar—I was shorter, bulkier, fairer than Ben—it was immediately apparent, even to strangers, that we were lovers from the aura we cast over each other when we were together. Ben was the type of man as comfortable in shorts as in a suit, outside in the park as indoor reading a book. He had a controlled, suave temperament but a wonderful imagination. I remember how, after seeing a movie, he could create a whole new plot from a single line of dialogue. But I think what I loved most about Ben was his ability to look at the future—our future together. He was always suggesting places for us to go, things for us to share. Ben had been burned and spurned in all of his previous relationships. And when we met he was as eager to be in love as I.

❍

I had a feeling I would see Scott again. It was a week after Ben's death and I had gotten up early, found Battello's leash, and snapped it onto his collar. Together we set out in the direction of Castro Street. Before I had met Scott in the doctor's waiting room, I thought I had noticed him once before near the corner of Market and Castro. Ben and I would often walk in that direction, stopping at one of the shops before heading back to our apartment. I remembered I had admired a young blond man through the glare of an afternoon sun, standing beside a folding table, asking pedestrians to sign a petition. That morning I hoped I would find the young man again and that he would be Scott. But I also had another feeling, a much more startling sensation. I felt it was time to let go, time to move on, and from the simple action of walking,

or even Battello dragging me along the streets, it would happen. I knew it was time to forget that Ben had died.

When we reached the intersection, Scott was not there. There was no table. Battello was straining to sniff a hydrant, so we continued walking. I noticed, as we approached Eighteenth Street, that there was a table sitting in a patch of sunlight and as we drew closer I saw Scott distributing pamphlets to passersby.

I veered Battello in the direction of the table. Scott did not look at us when we approached, but I took a pamphlet as we passed by the table. We had moved toward the table in a crowd of other men, and Scott had tried quickly to present a piece of paper into each of our hands. The other men continued walking. I stopped by the table and stared vacantly at the paper. Battello sat on the sidewalk and looked up at me.

"How's the allergy?" Scott recognized me, approached, and patted Battello on the head.

"Dead," I answered, knowing it made no sense in response to his question. I could not look at Scott; instead I stared at the words of the pamphlet, warnings of medications thought to be hazardous if used in treatments.

My hands began shaking. I realized I still did not have the strength for a sustained conversation, but I knew exactly where my thoughts were headed. I was trying to let go, trying to connect with Scott, trying in some sort of frantic way to stop from going crazy.

"Which way you headed?" Scott asked, and put his pile of papers on the table.

"Nowhere in particular," I answered.

"Why don't you meet me at the gym on Market Street in a half hour?" he said.

A sigh raced across my body, a jarring gasp for breath that crested and disappeared like a wave breaking against the shore. This must be what it is like to let go, I remember thinking. I dropped the sheet of paper, and Battello watched it float to the sidewalk. I never thought I would reach a point in my life where

I felt like I was drowning—floundering and fumbling without any sense of direction.

Scott must have noticed it. The sinking.

"You got to keep moving," he said, and took Battello's leash from my hand. We began walking. "There are days I don't feel like doing anything. But I know, even when I force myself to do something, I feel better afterward. You've got to find something that makes you feel better, and do it."

I knew then that I needed help, and with the realization came again that lightness, that pleasant, dizzy feeling inside my head. I still needed to let go. But by then I knew exactly what I had to do. I had to change my way of thinking.

❍

"You're too romantic," Mark said one night when I was at his apartment. "So was Ben." It was two weeks after Ben had died. Mark was cooking again at the stove. He turned off the burners and sat across from me at the table. "Me, I went straight for it. I can remember all the places I used to look for sex. But I can't remember the men. I remember the action of the sex more than I remember who it was with. It's funny sometimes what stays in your memory."

Maggie the cat scampered underneath the table and began to weave between my legs, rubbing her sides against my jeans. "But I do remember romance," Mark said, and leaned down to pet Maggie, who had worked her way over to his side. "About nine years ago, I noticed a guy following me on the street. At first I thought he was somebody I might have slept with before, someone who wanted to do it again. But he didn't approach me. And he kept following me for several days. Then I got a letter, then another and another. Then the letters started coming every day. They weren't sexual letters. They said things like, 'Your beauty is brighter than a thousand stars,' and, 'I could never imagine someone more

attractive than you.' I don't know how I knew it was him, but I did. He found out where I worked. He sent me flowers and presents. But he never did anything to meet me.

"It got to be kind of bizarre. He was always at the same bar, or out dancing where I was. But he never approached. Never said anything to me. I used to point him out to friends. But I remember after a while I got used to it. I got to depend on it, in a way, especially after some of the dreck I dragged home. One night I was walking home in the rain and there he was on the corner. I asked him if he wanted to come up for a drink. He wasn't that unattractive. He actually looked sort of nice. I certainly wouldn't have thrown him out of my bed, because I had bedded worse. So, what the heck, I was caught up in the romance of the moment. The idol pursuing the admirer.

"When he was here, I asked him what he wanted. He said he wasn't sure. So I pounced. We had sex. I remember the sex was great. We did it in a thunderstorm, a damn thunderstorm that lasted for hours. And then I never saw him again. The letters and presents stopped. I wonder if that's what he wanted. The sex. Or if the sex dissolved the illusion of romance, or that maybe he realized that neither of them, sex or romance, is a guaranteed path to love."

That evening, at home, I lay awake in bed. I could not sleep. Men kept dancing, spinning, and twirling through my mind. Tall men, husky men, blond men, rugged men, bronzed men, businessmen, athletic men. Men of all ages and shapes, heights and wits. I kept trying to make them disappear, but they kept dancing, whirling between colored spots of light shooting down from the recesses of a black, smoky ceiling. I could not figure out why these men would not disappear. So I kept watching them dance until I found the answer.

I had invited them into my memory.

One night ten years ago, I drove four hours from my Alabama town to Atlanta to discover these dancing men. I went to investigate my feelings, to understand who I was trying to be. I

needed to see if what I felt was unique or if there were others who shared my preferences and desires. I had heard there were dancing men in Atlanta. And there, in a crowded disco with blinking lights and thunderous, rowdy music, I became enchanted. There I knew it was all right to want to dance, to want a man. These were men who felt as I did. And I decided to join in the dance. The image of coming out into a world of dancing men has forever shaped my consciousness. And with this image, this belief, this decision to belong in this world, I received many invitations.

My first invitation to sex came from a man who had first asked me to dance. Another man carried me away from Alabama, and we danced together for almost six months in North Carolina. And it was there that the dancing and the sex became integrated, gave me an identity, and thrust in front of me adventures I could never have imagined. It was another dancing man who transported me to New York, the same man who disappeared shortly thereafter at the invitation of another dancing man. But I did not mind; I now had an identity. I had sex. And it was this sex that dressed me and led me through the streets. It was sex that sent me invitations to parties and bedrooms. It was sex that introduced me to the men who became my friends, the same sex that sent me searching through the parks, streets, stores, and bars. It was sex that kept me dancing.

And so I lay there that night in bed alone, wrapped and protected by my belief in dancing men, yet aware that my knowledge of this dancing, this sex had subconsciously defined my expectations. I wanted to imagine what it would have been like with Mark or Scott as a lover. What it might be like. What it would be like. But my belief and knowledge kept the speculation rooted in reality, and I understood what Mark had meant when he said that sex was not a guaranteed path to love. And the expectations, the desires, the dreams of what I wanted had become a sequence of evaporating hopes.

And I remembered, too, that night, why I had left New York. I had lived in the city for seven years and been through a succession

of jobs—first as a messenger for a law firm, then as a bartender in a nightclub, and later as a typist at a hospital, a salesman in a department store, and, finally, a researcher for a marketing firm. I was not driven to find a career; that was not the reason I had moved to the city. And when I left New York, I had every intention of returning. My roommate, Jack, had suggested I take a vacation. Jack, a short, paunchy man in his fifties who had made a career out of arranging Caribbean cruises and Mediterranean tours, said I was burned out. He said I needed to relax, clear my head, fly away from all the perimeters. The dancing had stopped, or at least I had stopped dancing. I had stopped because I was taking the world that dancing had generated too seriously. It had created an obsession to be surrounded by desirable men. It demanded a ritual of what to wear, what attitude to assume, and when to assume it. It provoked the excess to maintain the good time—the magic, the beauty, the high—through whatever drugs or drinks I wanted to try. And the result was the expectation that participating in this frantic revelry would guarantee an even better time in bed, which in turn, I had hoped, would lead to something more permanent, a relationship that not only involved sex but was also grounded in commitment, caring, companionship, and trust. I stopped dancing when I recognized I was being driven by desire. I was waiting for something to happen, something or someone to keep me dancing.

Jack had sensed my growing depression and recommended I travel a bit, perhaps even go somewhere distant and exotic for a while, such as China or the Far East; I had saved some money and he knew I could afford the trip.

"You should stay away from anything tropical," Jack said to me one night. "You don't want to be any place where natives walk around undressed."

I mentioned I wanted to go to Europe; I had never been abroad before and had always felt a poetic yearning to see what it was like. But I wanted to find a place that felt both familiar and foreign, a place that would interest and absorb me.

He frowned and answered, "Not London, dear. It's becoming too much like New York."

He went to his desk and found a map, returned to the couch, and spread it across his lap. "Paris is out, because you want to wait to go there with someone special. Amsterdam is pretty but the nightlife is too wild. Bavaria can really be boring if you're not into castles and mountains. Vienna is a little too grand for your tastes, I think. You'd be disappointed in Greece, but Rome and Milan are quite wonderful."

"What about Venice?" I asked, looking where his hand had fallen on the map.

"Venice," he whispered. "Now there's a place you could get lost."

❍

I often wonder why it is the rain that makes me remember how it felt. Perhaps it is the grayness of the sky, the way the wind can alter the direction of a falling shower, or the sense that the world is cleansing itself. Or perhaps it is the chill which sometimes accompanies it, penetrating the skin, stinging the joints of fingers and toes. Whatever, rain, and sometimes even the touch or nearness of water, can make the feeling come back to me, as perceptible as the cut from a razor.

When I arrived in Venice, it was in a torrential rain. The hotel room in the Dorsoduro where I was staying was even smaller and more cramped than the bedroom of my New York apartment. And the rain did not stop. After the second day of wandering aimlessly through the streets, I felt as if my umbrella were surgically attached to my hand. I had stopped in a café behind the Piazza San Marco when another downpour had made even the aimless roaming impossible. There was a group of tourists behind me who were insistent on sitting outside, underneath an awning, but I went inside and took a seat at an empty table in a corner of the café.

At the moment when even the pigeons were fleeing to the ledges of the buildings to escape the rain, the tourists finally abandoned their tables to settle inside. Everyone began laughing. Chairs were rearranged so that tables could be shared. And the man who came to share mine was Ben. He apologized for his intrusion and the way he must look; indeed, I remember he was quite a mess. His hair was dripping wet; his white shirt and tan slacks were streaked with gray from where he had scraped against the stones of dirty buildings to avoid the rain. It was Ben who later said that if I could fall in love in a moment like that, then it was a love he had no doubt would last. But I had laughed and said it was not like that at all. It was the moment of a stranger in a strange city sitting with a stranger, connected simply by the fate of the weather.

Even wet and disarrayed, Ben had the dark, sleek looks of an Italian, though I could tell he was not a native by the curiosity of his eyes. He explained he was an economics professor from San Francisco and had been attending a conference in Geneva when he decided, impulsively, he wanted to visit Venice. We spent the next four days together, in the afternoons, dodging the rain to see the Galleriè dell'Accademia, the Palazzo Ducale, and the Basilica dei Frari. In the evenings we stayed at Ben's hotel room; I had abandoned mine, though Ben's was not much larger: a bright yet musty accommodation with a lopsided floor and peeling strips of plaster the size of flags on the ceiling, furnished with a white canopy bed and fading tapestries on the wall. There were drinks at Harry's Bar, a shopping excursion to the markets of the Rialto, and a morning visit by boat to the island of San Michele, all journeyed beneath umbrellas. On the last day, on a rainy trip at sunset beneath the Bridge of Sighs, Ben asked if I would consider living with him in San Francisco.

I told Ben that life in San Francisco would not be the same as a vacation in Venice. But I was not surprised when the plane landed in New York and I could not leave the airport. Ben had given me both romance and sex. Now he was offering more. I have

never considered myself an impulsive person, but that day I bought another ticket and continued on to San Francisco. Sometimes, when something that is not devised or deliberate strikes, it can simply carry you away.

❍

There were twenty-two other men in the room besides myself and Scott. Twenty-two men I had never seen before. There was one woman, a middle-aged blonde: a short, thin woman who seemed dwarfed by the men in her presence and who kept lifting her eyebrows to make the tiny black dots of her eyes appear larger.

"I am not here to impart information," she explained when everyone was seated, "but to help you share your feelings."

"This is not an act of desperation," Scott had said before we took our seats.

"We must visualize the end of this virus," the blond woman continued. "We must see it as a newspaper headline or a television broadcast, a news report announcing its termination. We must try to see it dissolving and disappearing into the vacuum of the universe."

The twenty-two strange men in the room closed their eyes. Scott closed his eyes.

"Nothing lasts forever," the woman said as I closed my eyes.

There was not another word spoken in the room. In the silence I tried to imagine what this woman had asked for, but instead I could only see myself, standing at the end of a pier, the wind blowing lightly around me. It was a memory from two weeks before, three days after Ben's funeral. It was early morning, and when I had left the apartment I ran for many blocks, traveling by instinct across the hills and streets to the pier. And when I reached the end of the pier I ignored the world behind me; the park, the stores, the people were not there. It was only myself and a box I had carried from the apartment. I opened it and ripped the plastic bag inside apart, pouring ashes into

the water, trying not to think about what I was doing. I did not feel I was fulfilling a wish that had been left behind in a note, a hope of washing away any trace of guilt. It was merely something that had to be done. And when it was completed, I left the pier.

But when I returned to the street, I felt as if I had been thrown into a bottomless pool, my arms and legs listless, immobilized from the weight of the water. I had to remember that in order to stay afloat you have to stay in motion, you have to kick your legs and flutter your arms. In order to walk you have to move one foot in front of the other, swinging your arms from side to side. And in order to find my way home I had to remember which streets to take, where the sidewalks and signs would lead me. I knew exactly how these things should be done and where I should be headed, but I could not link the mental knowledge with the physical action, making something as simple as crossing the street require an intense, complicated concentration.

"I am not a doctor," the blond woman with the tiny eyes had said, breaking the silence. "I cannot cure anyone. But I do try to help people change their lives. I try to teach people that, if they restructure their beliefs, they can remold their existence. They can better their lives. To do this, you must focus on the positive."

I tried to remember my feeling that day when I had finally found my way back to the apartment. I had sat on the couch, shocked and grateful that I had made it safely home. But I felt a depression looming over me, making me shrink into the couch like a speck of dust. I couldn't shake the image of myself on the pier, emptying ashes into the bay.

"I have never considered killing myself," Scott said to the group of men and one woman. "I wouldn't even know how to do it. Something inside me tells me I must try to live as long as I can, that in doing so, in trying all the treatments, something might work—something so that someone else will not have to go through what I have. It's the only thing I have left to offer, so I have to offer it with all my heart."

Five days after that day on the pier I returned to work, returned to the tiny little desk on the second floor of an accounting office in a building on Embarcadero. I did not need to explain where I had been or what had happened. My co-workers knew Ben, knew all the details about his death. But I was still too new for many of these people to offer me condolences. I had only worked there two months.

And so, that first day back, I worked in silence, adding, subtracting, and balancing the figures on ledger sheets, while everyone sidestepped my discomfort with downcast eyes and trembling hands. It was Gary, Ben's friend who had found me this job, who tried to pry open the grip, the grasp between one who lives and grieves and one who is dead.

"I've been praying for you," Gary said to me when we were alone, near a storage cabinet that held office supplies. Gary was tall and slim, with a body that appeared to be all bones and angles. He had an intense blue-eyed gaze and a nervous habit of running his fingers through his wild blond hair before slanting his body to speak to someone shorter. "Gary and Richard had been lovers, off and on, for twelve years," Ben had explained one night when we were eating at Mark's. "When Richard died, Gary flipped out. He was in a psychiatric ward for a while, and someone brought him a Bible. When he got out, he carried that Bible everywhere."

"It was real annoying at first," Mark added. "But he never tried to provoke an argument or anything. We realized it gave him something to talk about. We called all his friends and told them to tolerate it. We told them *why* they had to tolerate it. He didn't lose a single friend because of God."

"God works in mysterious ways," Gary leaned and whispered in my face, pushing away the hair which had fallen in front of his eyes.

I remember I did not answer him. I could not even look at him. I wanted to tell him to save his breath for other sinners. I had met God only last week. God was a stocky forty-year-old man

with a receding hairline and a gray-flecked moustache who had walked into my apartment and washed the dishes and changed the sheets. But I did not tell him. I wanted to tell him that God had even spoken to me, but I did not. "Get up," God commanded me. "Shave," He ordered me. "Shower," He pushed me. "Drink this," He said, and set a cup of coffee before me. God was not offering me any consolation or sympathy or understanding, only immediate actions. "Get out. Go for a walk," He prescribed before he left. "Do something. If you have trouble, call this number." After God left I called the number but got a busy signal. God was preoccupied, talking with someone else.

I walked away from Gary and returned to my desk. He followed and stood over me when I sat in the chair. He continued to speak as though he had never been in love with another man.

"You must never forget that the ultimate relationship is between God and yourself," he said. "Not what you had with Ben. Know that and you will know God."

"Please," I finally spoke to him, not looking, just speaking. "Don't," I said firmly, in a tone I meant to make the conversation stop.

"God is with you always," Gary said.

I wanted to tell him what I thought about God. I wanted to tell him that if God was always with me, then it was God's fault Ben was dead. If God was present with me the day I sat waiting to see the doctor about an allergy, it explains His absence from Ben. He should not have been with me. He should have been with Ben. I said nothing to Gary about God's flaw, and began racing my finger over the buttons of the adding machine.

Later that day, Gary returned to my desk and left me a note. "Believe in God and He will provide you with the answers," it said.

No, I thought. God cannot answer my questions. He cannot tell me where Ben has gone, yet He can shatter my achievement that day when I finally calmed myself, got up off the couch, and went

into the kitchen for a glass of water. And when I sat down again I noticed, on the bottom of my legs, large smudges of the ashes I had just cast into the bay. He cannot tell me where Ben's soul is resting, but He can smear his death into my skin. He cannot tell me if I will ever see Ben again, but He can make the memory of Ben's life haunt me. I only wanted a life as orderly as the ledger sheets before me. I wanted a formula that provided a clear solution.

"I have no answers," I said to the woman, looking away from Scott and the twenty-two strange men. "The questions are always changing."

❍

No matter how successfully I was able to let go during the day, to move on, to forget, my desperation for Ben would return at night. Some evenings I was able to fight it off by drinking or taking pills. Most nights, however, my loneliness would prevent me from ever falling asleep. I would lie in bed in the dark, staring at the ceiling or watching the light which drifted in through the window from the street traffic. Some nights I would simply lie and watch Battello watching me. Battello had begun to sleep on the floor the day after Ben's death. Sometimes I would reach down and scratch his head, and his eyes would lift up to mine, and I knew he was just as confused as I was. Sometimes I would pat the bed and he would leap up and sleep beside me. But there were nights he refused to budge, his head between his paws, staring at me, waiting for me to tell him when Ben would come home. On those nights I would pile pillows on the bed, trying to re-create the body which once lay beside me, trying to find another way to fall asleep. But most nights I just stared at Battello, or stared at the ceiling, or stared at the shadows swimming across the wall.

I don't remember exactly when I started walking around the apartment in the dark. I think it was the night I thought that if I turned on the radio, the sound, the noise, would create enough

distraction so that my mind would allow me to fall asleep. I remember holding my arms up that night, into the light from the window, noticing the darkness of the hair on my skin, the way the light folded around my wrists and then bent into the darkness of my palms. It was then, that night, I think, that Ben first came back to me as vividly as when he was alive. I could smell his skin, his shaving cream, his underarms. I could taste his breath, his morning stubble. I could feel the fine curls of his hair, wet after showering, and the cleft of his chin. I could feel him lifting my body into a great hug, as he often would, trying to spin me around as though I were a rag doll.

And then I remember, every night afterward, I began to get out of bed and stand in the darkness of the center of the room, waiting for Ben to hug me and lift me into the air. Sometimes I remember him cupping my chin and tilting my head back as he always did, but before kissing me he would dance me around the room. Night after night he would dance and dance with me. Every other man, every other spinning, twirling, whirling man, disappeared to me except for Ben. I could feel my body once again covered by his fingerprints, his breath against my neck, my heart jumping and alive. Some nights, while we danced, I would notice Battello looking at us, his eyes wide and surprised. I kept Ben dancing as long as I could, as long as I needed him beside me in the darkness.

And I remember the mornings I would awake and find myself curled on the floor beside Battello, his dark, sad eyes once again staring into mine.

❍

It was a Saturday night, three weeks after Ben's death, when I met Scott for dinner at a café on Jefferson Street. The weather was warm and we sat outside on a terrace, underneath an awning, with a candle on our table, eating, talking, and watching the

couples stroll by. After dinner, we ourselves set out on a stroll, peering at the novelties that lined both the streets and the stores of Fisherman's Wharf. We continued walking for a while, until we sat on a bench in the park above Ghirardelli Square. The sky was clear that night, and the stars above twinkled as brilliantly as the lights of the bridge and the city. "When I first moved here, I used to walk here all the time," Scott said. "There were so many lights. It was so different from where I came from. Ohio was flat. You could only see one light at a time."

When I first moved to San Francisco, Ben and I once stopped at this same bench. It was a rainy afternoon, and before we sat, Ben dried the bench with a towel he carried in his gym bag. We sat underneath an umbrella, and Ben pointed out a building where he hoped we might one day live, because, as he said, the view was spectacular. I told him I was happy where I was, and we began to talk of how we wanted to spend our summer. Ben wanted to learn how to sail and knew of a lake in Canada where he had heard beginners could try their luck. I wanted to tell Scott all of this, that I had agreed with Ben about the sailing, but I did not. I wanted to tell him that I, too, had wanted to learn to sail. I wanted to tell him that I had laughed and only agreed on one condition, that this time, wherever we went, we would invite the sun to accompany us. I wanted to tell Scott that Ben had smiled and closed the umbrella and we had sat in the rain, but I did not. I had decided our evening of stars and lights should remain our own.

Later that night, we walked to Scott's apartment, and on the street beneath his window, Scott asked if I would like to come up for a drink. "Club soda," he said, laughing, when we reached the top of the stairs. "It's all I have."

Inside, after we had finished our drinks, Scott sat on the couch and I positioned myself in a chair. "I can't tell you how I feel, because I don't know," Scott began slowly, carefully. "I can't tell you what the pain is like, because I've never been through this type of pain before."

He stood and walked to a table near the door, found a letter, and carried it back to the couch, where he sat and read aloud. "'Dear Scott,'" he began. "'I am a mother of three children. My oldest son, Craig, is a carpenter and lives with his wife in San Diego. My daughter, Linda, is a travel agent and is married and living in Portland, and is expecting her first child, and my first grandchild, in September. My youngest son, Patrick, was a computer technician and lived in San Francisco until he died last month. When we were cleaning out his apartment I found his address book, and your name and address inside. I am writing this letter to let you know that Patrick has died, in case you didn't know already. Patrick fought against cryptococcal meningitis for nine months, but died after his second hospitalization from pneumocystis. I am not writing to sadden or scare you, I only want you to know I am proud of all my children and that I have loved them every day of their lives. Sincerely, Mrs. Baker.'"

Scott placed the letter on the couch. "I don't even remember him."

That night I stayed at Scott's apartment. We lay in bed together, and when I felt his body slide into sleep, I avoided closing my eyes. I was not afraid of sleep or dreams. I was not afraid of the dancing men. And I knew I would not need to resurrect Ben to dance with me that night. I was wide awake, ready to go on living.

Scott awoke and noticed I was not asleep. "I wish it was different," he said and closed his eyes and fell back asleep.

It was then I knew my life was changing again. I had decided to make Scott my responsibility.

○

"I know he means well, but God, he is so tedious sometimes," Mark had yelled one afternoon and flipped a Bible in my direction. Ben had been dead for six weeks.

We were at Mark's apartment, surrounded by cartons of cardboard boxes. I placed the Bible on the coffee table and then

held the flaps of a box down as Mark taped up the edges.

"You'll remember to water the plants," Mark had said. "The lady downstairs will come in once a week to clean and dust. Gary will check the mail. I'll call you to let you know if you should send the boxes."

Mark carried the box to a closet, where he placed it on top of several others. I walked to the window, opened it, and leaned my head out into the warm air. Maggie the cat jumped on the window ledge and sat beside my arm. On the street below I watched Scott help Gary put a suitcase in the trunk of Mark's car.

"He's really nice," Mark said. "Take care of him."

On the street Scott leaned against the car, smiled, and folded his arms. Gary brushed his hair from his eyes and leaned over to speak to Scott.

"I thought I could handle it," Mark had said when I joined him for dinner a week before that day of packing. "I thought I knew how to handle it. The therapy is fine for that one hour, but I'm finding I need more. There are just too many distractions here. I keep remembering the way things used to be. What I used to do. I was walking on Castro Street this morning and there was this guy with the most incredible chest I've ever seen. He was absolutely stunning. With a tan, no less. It's bad enough to have to live with this plague, but to have to look at something like that prancing down the street..."

It did not take Mark long to decide to leave San Francisco, though he said that it was only temporary, for the summer, and that he would be back when he got his head together. Mark had only recently found out he tested positive; the lesion he had discovered on his thigh had been diagnosed as Kaposi's sarcoma. He was moving to a cottage his sister owned in the mountains of Colorado, a cottage he explained was only an hour away from his parents' home. "There's not a gay man within miles," Mark had said, laughing, when he told me his plans. "At least none that anyone suspects. It's odd how the family takes you back in the end," he said. I knew he was right. I knew if I was in Mark's situation,

that I, too, would probably return home to the Alabama town I thought I had escaped.

"I never told you Ben called me from Venice," Mark had said that day, when we had finished with the boxes and he was wiping the counter with a sponge. I had followed him inside the kitchen and was stacking clean plates in the cupboards. "He called and said, 'I've met my desert flower.' He was referring to you." Mark smiled at me. "Ben and I used to rent a Mercedes convertible and drive to Palm Springs for the fun of it. There were so many beautiful boys just standing on the streets. It was always an amazing experience for him. Beauty in the midst of all that hot, dry desert. He called those boys 'desert flowers.' I knew Ben a long time. I know he was never happier than when he died. I think that's why he went so quickly. He wanted to go while he was happy."

The inside of my chest felt crammed, distended. I held my breath trying to make the feeling disappear.

"You'll get over him," Mark said, and threw the cloth into the garbage. "It just takes time."

I did not answer. As we walked through the apartment I knew it was not the boxed-up memories or the closing and locking of the windows which saddened me, it was the offer of time from someone who might be running out of it.

I lifted the last suitcase from the floor and followed Mark toward the door. He stopped by the mirror in the hall and looked at his reflection. "We were never meant to grow old anyway, were we? Look at these goddamn bags under my eyes."

As I watched him disappear from his reflection and scoop Maggie the cat into his arms, I remember I wondered if I would ever see him again.

❍

It's hard for me to reconstruct the months that followed; time moved erratically, some days would pass swiftly, others lingered,

vacuous and unremitting. At first Scott's illness was only a series of minor irritations, a cough which would not disappear, bouts with diarrhea, and a general malaise which could be rejuvenated by naps. We saw each other frequently, meeting for dinner after work, alternating spending nights at my apartment or his. Then I discovered, quite by accident when I phoned his office one afternoon, that he had started to leave work early, and not much later learned he had begun to miss full days. When I asked him about this he explained he could no longer control his exhaustion, possibly a side effect, he said, of the combination of new medications the doctor had prescribed. His voice had become low and hoarse, which he thought was from a lack of sleep, and I noticed he had started to lose weight. Sometimes he would be sullen or grumpy, other times his temper could flare over something insignificant: a hole in a sock or a misplaced book. For a while he tried to push me away, avoiding my phone calls when I knew he was home, and finally, one night, refusing to open the door of his apartment to let me inside.

"I can't," he said through a crack in the doorway.

"Why?" I asked, annoyed, my arms full of groceries that night.

"It's not fair," he answered.

"You can't blame yourself," I began, knowing where this conversation was going, having started and stopped it with him many times before. "It's not your..."

"No, to you," he interrupted.

"I'm not complaining."

"I'm just going to pull you down with me. I can't do that to you."

"You must not know me very well," I said, "to think you can get rid of me just because you're not feeling all right."

"You never knew me when I was really happy," he said, and started to cough.

"But I know you now and I want to come in."

I knew his depression was mounting, but I also recognized his stubborn will, his refusal to admit he was beginning to need help. But I could be as stubborn as Scott, and a few minutes later he had reluctantly let me inside.

In bed that evening he tossed fitfully, unable to sleep. Holding him, though he was sweating, I could feel his body shivering. Holding him tighter, I could sense a new brittleness in his bones; his skin felt as thin and delicate as paper. I remember that night was the first time I really felt helpless. I wanted Ben to appear, lift me into the night, and dance me away from all of this.

"Move in with me," I said to Scott, finding an uncertain strength, my voice reverberating against the darkness of the bedroom.

"What?" he asked.

"If you're worried, move in with me."

"No," he answered. "It's not going to get any easier."

It was not easy to convince Scott to move in with me. But I made him, realistically, confront his options. He could stay in his apartment and rely on the help and support of his friends, worrying about paying his bills if he could no longer work; or he could return to Ohio and live with his parents. But his parents, as I reminded him, were not even aware he was ill. And what about the availability and control over his medications and treatments; would he be able to manage those in Ohio? I reminded him of his other options: he could move in with another friend—several had offered—or he could eventually end up in a treatment center, though I knew this was not an alternative he wanted to consider. There was a part of me that felt selfish in forcing him into a decision, but I honestly felt it needed to be resolved, and I knew, perhaps most of all, I wanted to be with him as much as possible. At that point I realized I needed Scott as much as I knew he needed me.

It was Dale, Scott's best friend, who finally convinced him to move. Dale, a corporate lawyer, had known Scott since college. A solid, athletically built young man with prematurely graying hair

at his temples and a solemn attitude of assurance, Dale, for years, had helped Scott with his finances. Recently, he had closed Scott's checking account and sold his small portfolio of investments, holding Scott's money in his own personal account, from which he paid Scott's bills. When he came over one night to Scott's apartment and I mentioned my suggestion, Dale turned indignant and told Scott, "Do you think you're going to walk into a bar and find a better offer?" Later, I learned they had once been lovers, though I never discovered why their relationship had ended and they had decided to remain friends; I can only imagine it was because they were simply both too headstrong for one another. There were times when I was jealous of Scott's trust in Dale. Often Scott would call Dale for advice, knowing he would get a fast, rational answer. But there was a night when Dale stayed after Scott had gone to sleep, and while we sat watching television he said to me in his brisk, efficient tone, "You mean a lot to him." And then, before leaving, added, "I'm scared, too. I have every reason to be."

I tried my best to make Scott comfortable at my apartment. Scott said he was willing to leave everything behind, though I knew him better than that. Dale and Gary and I packed his books and records, and rearranged my furniture to make room for Scott's couch and bookcases and the antique Victrola he had inherited from his grandmother. Ben's clothes, which I could never before touch, let alone relinquish, I gave to friends or donated to charities. I sent Ben's books and papers to the university library. Most of his personal belongings I threw away; some items—his souvenirs from Europe, his college diploma, and a painted ceramic dish where he used to keep his car keys—I mailed to his father in Arizona. His wallet, watch, and photographs I packed in a box to save for myself.

When Scott moved in, his spirits fluctuated even more wildly than before. There were days when he would refuse to shower or leave the apartment; sometimes he would begin crying when he looked at himself in the mirror, noticing how his skin had become

pasty and white and his hair had thinned and started to recede. In the mornings he would sit in bed and watch me get dressed. I knew he was comparing our bodies; I could see the frustration etched in his stare. At times his anger could be extremely bitter or violent; worrying about the success of a new treatment, the loss of sensation in his left arm and leg, or his inability to concentrate or read, he would throw whatever was within his reach against a wall, tear up a pillow or a T-shirt, or start yelling till he lost his voice. I knew he was beginning to feel defeated, though there were moments when he would be ecstatic, recounting for me the plot of his favorite soap opera or a game he had played with Battello. His health began to improve when he stopped taking the steroids the doctor had recommended to maintain his weight. And there were even days when nothing appeared to be wrong, though often, at night, lying in bed, his head on my chest, he would press his hand against mine and say, "Tell me a story. Take me away from all this."

There are fragments of the time I spent with Scott that are so distinct they seem as if they happened yesterday: the way he would lie on the couch watching television with Battello curled at his feet; the way, when sleeping, he breathed through his mouth; the way that, the day we drove through Napa Valley to find a new restaurant, he insisted, with a laugh, that we drive down Lombard Street on the way home, late at night. Many things I have forgotten; others I have blocked from my memory.

Dale and Gary were frequent visitors, accompanying Scott on trips to the post office or the bookstore, or to get a haircut. Often one or both would join us for dinner. One night Gary handed me a postcard he had gotten from Mark. I knew Mark had moved in with his parents, and the card, from Denver, had been sent by Mark's sister. It read, optimistically, "Doing better. Will be back for a visit soon." The month before, Gary and I had moved everything out of Mark's apartment, and when we knocked on the superintendent's apartment, I noticed, for the first time, as

Gary handed over the keys, a sorrow overtake his posture. There was so much information I wanted from Gary. What was it like, what had happened when Richard was sick? Some evenings, when Scott had gone to bed, I would describe to Gary, over the phone, meticulously, the events that had happened that day. I always waited for Gary to say, "With Richard, he..." but the advice, the details I wanted to know, were never forthcoming.

"God does help, you know. He does care," Gary would instead say.

"Yes," I would answer. I had asked God several times for help.

God appeared to me many times in those months. He was a high-school boy who delivered lunches to Scott, a young woman who offered to do laundry, a neighbor who would drop by in the afternoons to see if Scott wanted to play cards. I saw God in the actions of friends, escorting Scott to doctors, picking up his prescriptions, bringing him a new magazine or video to watch. I felt God through the touch of a nurse, smelled Him when Dale brought Chinese takeout, heard Him when Mark called one night on the phone and asked to speak with Scott. But I could never understand that the God who was showing such compassion and kindness was the same God who had disrupted, almost to the point of destruction, a basic conception of my life, my love for another man.

❍

I have not been able to forget Ben a single day since his death. I have been reminded of him by articles in the newspapers, by reports on the six o'clock news, by his friends and mine calling to ask me how I am, by the details I have to attend to as the executor of the small estate he left behind, details which can be mundane, annoying, or time-consuming, such as sorting through bills, writing letters, or photocopying his death certificate. And on the sidewalks, walking, where I think my actions, my movement will pull me away from his life and back to my own, I see reminders

of him in the people who pass: one man has his eyes, another his profile, others his eyeglasses or his out-turned walk.

When I visited Scott in the hospital I thought I had come to terms with all of it. I thought I had a grasp of the situation. I thought I was getting stronger. Scott was sitting in bed looking through a magazine when I entered the room.

"This floor has the most gorgeous interns," he said in the raspy whisper his voice had become as he looked up at me. "There's this one Italian..."

He stopped. He must have read my eyes.

"I've spent the day making lists." The tone of his voice changed and he showed me a pad of paper on the stand beside the bed. "I can tell you at least forty-seven things that make me happy besides sex. I can name eight people besides my family who I have truly loved. I can tell you fifteen therapies I have tried to stay alive. I can think of seventeen ways I would rather die."

I did not say anything. I placed the pad of paper on the bed and walked to the window.

"You did this because of him, didn't you? That's why you helped. That's why you're here, aren't you?" Scott asked.

I did not need to answer.

"I know why he did it," he said. "It's in your eyes. He didn't want to see it. He was afraid of watching you watching him die. That's why you came to me. You needed to watch someone die, in your own mind, to justify his death."

Outside, I noticed it had started to rain. I left the window and sat on the edge of Scott's bed and took his hand in mine. His fingers were chilly; his arm, where it had been prodded with needles and intravenous tubes, was a patchwork of purple veins and bruises. He had not shaved in two days and his neck looked as raw and thin as a twig of a winter tree.

"I'm not bitter," he said, and ripped up his lists. "I'm thankful I have someone here. I only hope that what you feel will not pass away with death."

The feeling did not pass away with death. Scott was released from the hospital in two days, but two weeks later he was back. Another bout with pneumonia. He died a month after that first visit to the hospital, eight months after Ben had died. The last week, I was there every day. I never left his side. I was there when the fluid which filled his lungs made him drown.

The last week Scott was in the hospital, I told him the story. I didn't have to, he told me. I didn't have to go through it again, he said. I wanted to, I replied to him. I wanted him to know. I told him that when I came home from the doctor's office that day I first met him, I had met the old woman, Mrs. Tenna, who lived upstairs from our apartment. She was slowly climbing the stairs with two bags of groceries in her arms. I offered to carry the groceries up to her apartment, and when we reached the third floor, where she lived, she invited me in for a cup of coffee. She told me she had lived in San Francisco for thirty years and had been born in Denmark. She had married a man who had sailed her off to Boston, and when her husband died, she married another, who took her and her two children west. First to Seattle, where her husband worked for an airline, and then for a while to Texas. Her third husband had moved her to San Francisco, a city she said she loved and decided to stay in after his death, because her children had married and lived nearby, in San Mateo and Oakland. She had been everywhere, she told me, from Wheatland, Wyoming, to Egypt, only to end up here now, an old woman struggling to climb to the third floor with two bags of groceries. No regrets, she said, and smiled when she finished her story. And I remember feeling relieved that she had distracted me from the fear the doctor had caused. And when I went back downstairs to our apartment, Ben was asleep in the bed, Battello lying beside him atop the bedspread. I wanted to wake Ben and tell him the doctor had said my rash was due to an allergy, just as he had expected, but I didn't. I let him sleep. I went into the living room, turned the stereo on softly, sat on the couch, and read the newspaper until Battello sprang into the room and began to lick

my hand. And then I began to have difficulty breathing. I got up from the couch and went into the bedroom. Ben wasn't sleeping. He was dead.

I told Scott of the horror of the rest of the day: the visits from the police and detectives, the arrangements for the funeral, the phone calls to Ben's family and friends, the arrival of the mortician, and the way they carried Ben out of the apartment on a stretcher, zipped in a dark, airless plastic bag. I told Scott I knew why Ben had done it, but I was afraid of believing that was the reason. Ben had not wanted to drag me through months, maybe years, of his being ill. He had left me a note that said he loved me too much to put me through that. I didn't want to admit that that was the reason, but I did that day. And I told Scott that was why I had found out where he was. Why I had made a point of finding Scott, meeting him again. I didn't want him to die alone. I had to go through it. I wanted and needed to understand.

❍

I used to think the world was divided into us and them, that I was part of a secret society, a fraternity of men, as it were, who could distinguish one another by discreet clues and codes: a style and fit of clothing, an expression of body language, the lingering contact of eyes. Yet I always knew I was not immune to the rest of the world; after all, I was a product of their environment. I was raised by parents with a standard of morals, a belief in honesty, freedom, and trust, who instilled in their children equal portions of politeness and guilt. But by the age of thirteen I knew I was different from my parents, detached by some other schism than the separation of generations. I remember one night lying on the floor of our den watching television, becoming disturbed as I watched a man kiss a woman; I knew my curiosity was part sexual arousal, yet I was confused about why I was more attracted to the man, imagining what it would be like if he were embracing

and kissing me. I began studying men carefully, the way the sweat formed on my father as he mowed the yard bare-chested, the way the older boys at school touched themselves as they showered in the locker room. I started locking myself in my bedroom, staring at the pictures of athletes in magazines, memorizing the firmness and energy of their bodies, fantasizing they were next to me, touching me, wanting me, needing me. I read every book I could find on sex, even the ones my parents kept hidden in the back of their closet, alarmed and even more confused by the descriptions of homosexuality as a deviation and a perversion. My senior year in high school, I began driving at night to Atlanta, the next day explaining my absence to my exasperated parents by saying I had been at a game or out with friends. And I thought that, as I grew older, life would begin to make more sense, that the education and rebellious confusion of my teens, the explorations and efforts in my twenties, would emerge and settle into some sort of cognizable conclusion. Now, having just turned thirty-three, I realize that the more I learn, the less I know. My father, at this age, had a career as an engineer, a wife, three kids, two cars, a house, and monthly mortgage payments. Sometimes I think all I have now that is tangible is my anger, my embitterment, my disconsolation because of death.

Death, until now, has been an infrequent visitor in my life. My parents, grandparents, and brother and sister are all healthy and alive. I had an uncle who died in a factory accident when I was eight, but he lived far away and his death was only mentioned one morning at breakfast; no sorrow, no change, were perceptible in my parents' behavior. Often I think it is not so much death that now maddens me, but the extinction of those I know who are too young to die: death, as it were, from an uncontrollable war.

I can't say what grief is harder: the loss of a parent, a child, a sibling, a spouse, a lover, or a friend. The night I called Ben's father, the day I met Scott's parents at the hospital, the morning the phone rang and a tiny, tearful voice announced that she was

Mark's sister and that he was dead, I felt I had no monopoly on grief. But were they aware my sorrow had more depth than anger? Did they understand my fear: that this could just as easily have happened to me, could, in fact, still happen?

There were many years when I disregarded my parents, presuming geographical distance would keep us out of each other's thoughts, believing any discussion of my life would make them embarrassed, ashamed, or unable to accept and understand. Parents, of course, do not want their children to be different from themselves. After Scott's funeral I called my parents, and when my mother answered the phone I began to explain to her some of the missing sequences of my life. I wasn't trying to scare her or make her upset; I wasn't seeking her blessing. All I wanted was some facts to be known: what had happened, the way I lived. My mother said she would tell my father, who was not at home, of our conversation. And then she asked if I wanted her to visit. "Not yet," I answered, and felt, for the first time in many years, that misery, that spasm of sudden unhappiness, which is homesickness, of a child wanting his parent to protect him from the outside world.

When Scott died I thought I would feel that something had come to an end. But now, almost a year since Ben's suicide, I am still amazed at how stirred up I am, a man stirred up about sex and death. I thought at the end I would move away from San Francisco, but I have not. Instead, Battello and I have moved to an apartment near the harbor piers.

But I have gotten a new job. Now I work in a store near Fisherman's Wharf, a store which sells T-shirts and souvenirs to people who pass by on the street. And my allergies have long since disappeared, thanks to the medication a new doctor prescribed, and the man who owns the store where I work lets Battello sit by my side.

I thought, perhaps, if I started over with a new home and a new job, I would forget about what had passed. I would forget about Ben and Scott and Mark and Richard; even Gary and Dale would

slip from my memory. But, like the life I had had before them, the Alabama youth, the invitations to dance, the sexual quest of New York, they were now, irrevocably, a part of me. With no regrets.

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There is something wonderful about the way a man dances, the way the hips move back and forth or in and out, the shoulders shift to heavy rhythms of music, the feet twist in a way not possible when walking. There is something wonderful about watching a man dance, the eyes darting to follow an attractive figure weaving between patterns of light and sound. There is something wonderful about dancing with a man: eyes, shoulders, hips, and feet balanced, connecting to a synchronous beat. There is something wonderful about dancing, enrapt in the magic of music and motion.

A month ago I decided to go dancing; I had this crazy urge to know if there were still men dancing. I showered and dressed and went to a disco I had once heard Ben mention. The men were still there. But this time I did not wait to see if there were any invitations; I did not wait to find out if these men were dancing the way I used to dance. Instead, I stepped out on the dance floor by myself and unlocked my most important secret. Action does help smooth the pain. The muscles began vibrating beneath my skin, and a feeling of motion began pushing me forward. Dancing, I could release the frustration, I could ease the heartbreak of death. I could forget for a moment about this plague. I could forget about sex. Dancing suddenly became a physical pleasure, not a philosophical quest. And I was aware that for the first time in my life, I was not afraid of dancing alone.

Now, every evening when I leave the shop, Battello and I walk to the park near the piers before we return to the apartment. I throw a stick and he retrieves it. I did not teach Battello this trick. That is something Scott had done, and Battello, I believe, finds it as much a joy to carry the stick in his mouth and drop it in my

hand as I do to see how far I can throw it. Three weeks ago, when we were walking on the pier, I stopped and asked a man who was scrubbing the deck of a sailboat if he could teach me how to sail. He gave me one of those looks, the kind that goes up and down the body, smiled a little nervously, and said he would. His name is Neil and he is quite handsome: tall, dark-brown hair, deep-blue eyes shaded by silver wire-rimmed glasses, and about five years older than me. Besides teaching me how to sail, Neil has asked me out on two dates; the first time we went out for dinner, the second to see a movie. But the happiest moments I have with Neil are when Battello and I sit on the deck of the sailboat. With one of my hands holding on to a rail and the other holding on to Battello, I watch the wind flap the sail, Neil tug a rope and steer the rudder. Battello and I lift our heads into the wind, feeling the breeze rush up from the water and sweep across our faces. The day after Ben's suicide, Mrs. Tenna knocked on my door. She had heard about Ben. She knew all about the way he had willingly swallowed a fatal combination of pills. She walked into my apartment and threw a bucket of water on the bedroom floor. We both stood and watched it puddle. Ghosts cannot cross water, she told me. She said it was an old custom. Her mother had done it before her. There is a moment, just before the sun sets, when Battello and I are on the deck of the boat, the wind scattering our hair in every direction, when I want to find a stick and throw it as far as I can, as far as my arm will toss it, hoping it may cross the water and fall safely on another land. But I do not. I believe in ghosts. I really do. I have to believe in something. For now.

What You Talk About

You have made arrangements to meet him at a bar. He is a friend of a friend. When you talked on the phone with him, he seemed nice and interested in you, but you were hesitant about meeting him for a date. In the last two years, you have only had two other blind dates; one was bald and the other wore an earring in his left ear. Not that this really bothered you; you have dated men before with both those characteristics. But the first one had the mannerisms of a truck driver and the appearance of a nerd, the second looked like the type of person you would avoid in dark alleys. And what really did bother you was you could not connect with them no matter how hard you tried; they were both so vague, one was even mysterious. But when your friend from the city called last week to see how you were doing, he said, I know someone you might want to meet. You told your friend that you hated blind dates, and reminded him of your previous ones, the bald guy and the man with the earring. Your friend answered rather emphatically, I think this is someone you might want to meet. He only lives forty-five minutes from you.

You are meeting this blind date at a bar you have never been to. It is a bar attached to a restaurant. Your expectations are not high and you are a little stressed out from a tough week at a job you don't much like. It is Friday night. You are only doing this because of your friend from the city, because he keeps hounding you to start dating again, to start seeing someone. Sometimes your

friend, who still lives in Manhattan, doesn't seem to comprehend that there are not many available gay men who live in this area of Pennsylvania.

The arrangement you made with this blind date was only for a drink; dinner together following was an option either party could refuse. However, you are already hungry. As you enter the bar, you hope for a moment you have been stood up.

There are only two men in this bar. One you estimate is over sixty-five. You know it is not him. In the light of this bar, which is dim, the other man looks quite handsome: virile and rugged, like the type riding a horse in a cigarette ad. You try to wipe the shock from your face as he turns to you and speaks your name.

You wonder how he recognized you. You worry a minute about whether you look too gay as he shakes your hand; after all, this is a straight bar in a small, rural town. Then you remember you told him you wore black wire-rim eyeglasses. No one else in the bar is wearing black wire-rim eyeglasses.

As he rises from the bar stool where he was seated, you see he is shorter than you expected. Though he told you he was six feet tall, he does not seem four inches taller than you. Perhaps it is because he told you he weighed 165 and you thought that he would be skinny. This six-foot guy looks healthy, you notice. He has a full head of hair and no earring. You observe right away that he has large hands and small feet. You sit down on a bar stool and worry because you think your feet are larger proportionally than your hands. He sits down beside you and places his hand against his beer bottle. You order a beer, even though it has been months since you've had any alcohol.

There is an awkward pause after your first sip of beer. The carbonation in your mouth and stomach has jolted your senses. You cough and look at the bartender, a short, husky man with closely cropped black hair peppered with gray, and admire the way the tendons of his arms flex as he wipes the inside of a glass with a cloth. You think that the bartender is not better-looking than

this guy. Your blind date asks if you had any trouble finding this bar. No, you answer, only finding a parking space on this block. You ended up parking on a side street. There is another awkward pause. You look around the bar and say this is a nice place, you never knew it existed. He says he has only been here a few times and points to a doorway that leads to the restaurant. He says it is rather expensive. Another awkward pause and he asks you how your week was. A strange question to ask, you think, because at the beginning of this week he did not even know you. Rough, you answer, and begin to complain about the woman you work for and the hour it takes to commute to your job. You start to describe your car, an old relic, which you are convinced personally dislikes you because it keeps having to be repaired, when you realize you are complaining too much. You ask him how his day was, but your voice sounds edgy. It doesn't sound as sincere as when he asked his question. While he tells you he got up early this morning to finish a few errands and do some cleaning before leaving for work, you notice he sounds calm, as though all his thoughts are carefully organized before he speaks. His voice is light and fluid; you cannot detect any accent. When you mention you saw a tiny field mouse run across your bathroom carpet this morning he laughs, and you like the way it ends in a quick, raspy crack. He says he was busy at work and adds he got home around four o'clock and took a nap before coming here tonight. No wonder he seems so at ease, you think. No wonder he looks so good. No wonder he doesn't look bitter, angry, or depressed. He had a nap.

What you know about him already: He told you he does not smoke or do drugs. He is a teacher. Like you, he is in his early thirties and he is looking for a friend and/or lover. He likes to go bowling and refinish furniture and considers himself conservative. During the first phone conversation you had with him, he told you he has a cat, lives in a third-floor apartment, doesn't go out to bars much unless with a friend, and was reading *Significant Others* when you called. Enough to convince you he was not an ax murderer.

You ask him what subject he teaches. He says botany. You ask if that is a requirement for a high-school diploma in this state. He answers that it is a special course for advanced students. While he is explaining the course he teaches, you are thinking about the house you are renting. You had heard that the previous tenants were amateur horticulturists. In your yard, there are several plants surrounded by chicken wire or propped up by long, thin stakes. You wonder how to work this into the conversation. You don't when you realize you don't know the names of any of these plants, and you are attracted to this guy, he interests you, and you don't want to turn him off by seeming ignorant.

He asks you if you grew up in Pennsylvania. You tell him you are originally from the South and after college you moved to New York City, where you lived for ten years. You say you never even realized this state existed until you visited last summer with a friend whose parents live in a nearby town. You tell him you have only lived in Pennsylvania for three months. The only people you know are your friend from the city, who occasionally visits his parents, the real-estate agent who rented you your house, and a lesbian couple who run a bed-and-breakfast nearby. You don't mention the reason you moved out of New York. You don't mention that everything about the city was beginning to annoy you; your job made you irritable. You say nothing about your lover dying from AIDS. You don't mention that after the funeral there was nothing else for you to do in the city and so you had a nervous breakdown. You only say you needed a change. You try to keep the conversation light. You tell him it is so different living in a rural area. You mention you just learned how to clean your chimney. You add you never realized you would spend so much time scraping frost off your windshield.

He tells you he has lived here for three years. Before that he was in North Carolina and Maryland and California. He asks you if you have dated much. You wonder what the term *date* means this year and in this part of the country. Does it mean date as

in getting together with a friend, date as in one person pays for everything two people do, or date as it was known in the seventies, to have sex? You opt for the last choice, since he is your age, and you realize your answer really fits all three definitions: not much.

You notice he is staring at you. Looking you over. You think at last all those mornings you spend exercising are finally paying off. You know you look younger than your stated age. All your friends tell you so, tell you that you could pass for someone in his late twenties. You wonder if your date notices the tiny nick in the cleft of your chin where you cut yourself shaving this morning. He asks you if you drive to the bars in Philadelphia. You say you did when you first moved here, because you missed the city. But you don't anymore. You mention you watch a lot of movies on the weekends now.

He is wearing a heavy knit maroon sweater, but you can tell he keeps himself in shape by the way the fabric stretches across his shoulders. You imagine what he looks like undressed, though you cannot determine whether his chest is hairy or smooth. You decide it must be smooth, because you do not notice any hair at his wrists, and though you remind yourself you must be interested in the person, not the physique, you cannot shake the mental photograph you have created of the two of you in bed together, your head resting on top of his smooth chest. You wonder if he likes to kiss, cuddle, wrestle, or massage. He looks briefly at you and then glances in the direction of the bartender. You know he is making a comparison. He turns again toward you and you study his expression, looking for some sort of sign of disappointment, but he smiles at you and takes a sip of his beer. You wonder what sex would be like with him. Is he rough or passionate, gentle or affectionate? You begin to twirl the bottom of the beer bottle between the palms of your hands, a habit you have when you are nervous. You wonder if he knows what you are thinking. You wonder when was the last time he had sex. You wonder if he would be afraid to kiss you.

When you spoke with him on the phone you told him you are hardworking and honest, stable but shy, which is why you are never

relaxed at a bar. You said you are easily entertained and consider yourself a romantic. You mentioned you are both rational and adventurous, intelligent and athletic, and have a dry, sometimes cynical sense of humor. You said you like traveling, reading magazines, and playing the piano, enjoy the theater, photography, and biking. You told him you watch your weight, eat plenty of fiber, and keep your light-brown hair short and trimmed regularly. You added you are a casual dresser, choosing clothes for comfort, though tonight you are wearing the indigo shirt that makes your eyes look softer, bluer. You notice you are both wearing jeans, though his are a new blue and yours are an old black. You make a mental note of what you are wearing. If you see this guy again you must not wear the same outfit.

He asks you if you went home for the holidays. You say no, because you were just there in September for your younger sister's wedding. You say this matter-of-factly, without any emotion. You think your tone sounded a little too blunt, so you add that your parents' house in Memphis was too far to drive to with only one day off, so you spent the holiday with your friend and his mother. There is an awkward pause. You notice his expression, which you think looks serious. You think this is too much information for him to register at once. Then he says his sister is expecting a baby any time now. She lives in Florida, and he explains his mother spent the holidays down there this year. You think a moment about Florida and the sun and the beach and the hot weather.

Something else you remember you know about him already. His lover died of AIDS three years ago, roughly about the time your lover became sick. For a moment you wonder how he handled it; you wonder if he had a breakdown, like you.

You ask him if he thinks it is going to snow this weekend. He says they are predicting four to six inches. You remember you have just spent a fortune to have snow tires put on your car. You ask him how the roads are here when it snows. He says they are pretty good about plowing the main ones, but the back roads can be difficult.

You have finished your beer. He takes the last sip of his. He asks if you want to have dinner. He's interested, you think, and you answer yes. He asks where you want to eat. You remember you don't have a lot of money in your wallet. You suggest a place three blocks away, a restaurant that has a comfortable, homey feel: dark, nonpretentious, and inexpensive. You slip on your jacket and head for the door.

Outside, you walk slightly ahead of him. The sidewalk is narrow, and since you are the one who knows where the restaurant is, you lead the way. When you arrive at the building, you hold the door open for him to enter first. Inside, you watch him mentally take in the surroundings.

A blond waiter shows you to a table. Looking at the menu, your blind date asks you what you recommend. You say the chicken and veal are good, but you will probably order something light, like the chef salad. You think to yourself that this appears healthy, and when you ordered it once before, you couldn't finish it. You don't want to appear piggish.

The waiter brings glasses of water and takes your order. Your blind date opts for the chicken. You stick with the salad. When the waiter leaves, your date asks if you think the waiter is cute. You say, sort of, and mention that if he had shaved and showered this morning, he could probably be a knockout. He says he has a weakness for blonds. You feel like you've lost a race. You wonder what you would look like if you dyed your hair.

The lighting is brighter in the restaurant than it was at the bar. You notice for the first time your blind date has brown eyes. There is a small bend at the bridge of his nose. You wonder if it was ever broken. You want to ask him to come over tonight. Instead you ask him what his plans are for the weekend.

He tells you he has some work to do on Saturday and then adds he is having brunch on Sunday with some friends. He asks if you like to cook. You answer, only if it's frozen. You have little patience for chopping, stirring, browning, and all that stuff. He says he

enjoys cooking. You think he holds the invention of the microwave against you. He asks what type of food you like to eat. You say, just about anything, but your all-time favorite food is pineapple upside-down cake. He says he likes vegetables a lot. What type of vegetables do you like? he asks. You feel an urge to roll your eyes but you suppress it. Again you feel defeated. You are thirty-four years old and you are being judged by your interest in vegetables. Anything, you answer. Except lima beans. You wrinkle your nose. It is an ingrained reflex. You instantly regret your answer. There is only one other word in the English language which produces that same expression on your face and that word is *liver*. And though you don't mention that, you can't keep from thinking about it. He says he likes lima beans.

You try to redeem yourself by saying your mother was not a good cook. You explain to him how over the years you have developed a taste for things slightly charred. You know instinctively this conversation is headed in the wrong direction. There is an awkward pause. You panic that you have lost him. You change the subject. You ask him if he saw the new Bette Midler movie. He says he hasn't been to a movie in about four months. You are thankful when the waiter reappears with your food.

You talk sporadically while you eat. You offer him your onions, which he accepts. He offers you a taste of his chicken, which you decline because you are not in the mood for chicken. But then you worry he might be offended you didn't accept—you remember someone once told you sharing food is an intimate gesture—so you tell him you changed your mind, you will try a piece. You watch him slice off a corner of a thigh and place it onto your plate. You wonder what it would be like sitting down to dinner every night with this man. Would you like what he cooks, would your plates match his glasses, could you afford to live in a place that has a built-in dishwasher? You wonder if he is neat or sloppy. Does he leave the cap off the toothpaste, forget to flush, wash colors and whites together, remember to take the trash out on Wednesdays?

You hope he wouldn't object to your favorite towel, the old, unraveling, large dark-green one.

You have finished dinner and have ordered a cup of coffee, decaffeinated. You are frantically racking your brain so you can make some sort of connection with this man. He asks you what type of music you listen to. You say you enjoy everything except heavy metal. You tell him what you listen to is usually determined by your mood. You like oldies during the week, Top 40 and disco on Saturdays, and classical, preferably baroque, on Sundays. You also explain that you usually like a particular song more than an artist, which is why you haven't bought any albums in a long time. He says he likes country music a lot. You say you like the way country music has evolved over the last few years. The way the lyrics have matured. You say you like country music a lot more since you no longer live in the South. He says his favorite singer is Patsy Cline. You agree, Patsy Cline is unbeatable.

You split the bill and leave the waiter a generous tip, in spite of the fact he was a distracting blond. Outside, the night air feels refreshing and you walk together in the direction of your car. You realize you have done too much talking and thinking tonight and you are tired. But nothing has been said about your lover who died, or his lover who died, yet you know you have both been thinking of both of them. You have mentioned nothing about drugs, insurance rates, or T-cell counts. He has said nothing about testing positive, though neither have you, but you know from your friend in Manhattan that this is the simple, ineffable link you share with this man.

When you reach your car, you suddenly remember you have never given him your phone number. You don't want to seem pushy about getting together another time. You want him to make the next move, to see if he is interested in you. At your car he asks if you want to get together again next week. You say yes and write your name on a piece of paper you find in your glove compartment. You hand him your number and you both stand awkwardly on

the sidewalk. You say, "It was nice to meet you, Carl." There is no attempt at a kiss; this is a small town after all. You shake hands and he says, "I'll call you soon, Tim."

In the car, driving home, you wonder if he will ever call. You think again about Jay and miss him, deeply. And then you think again about vegetables. You wish you had told Carl you really like spinach. You have always liked spinach. You will always like spinach.

Reunions

"Imagine," Glenn said. "The idea of it."

We were seated at a window table that looked out onto Eighth Avenue. A bright crack of sunlight bent through the glass and landed on a row of bottles behind the tall, dark mahogany bar. It was late morning and the restaurant was empty. Glenn was on his second martini; I was still sipping my first beer. Though I have known Glenn for almost a decade, we hadn't seen each other in almost three months; our communication had been limited to phone conversations and notes left to one another on the refrigerator in our friend Peter's apartment. After Peter's funeral service, an hour earlier, we had walked the three blocks to this restaurant.

Glenn had just finished telling me the story of when Peter, in the hospital, decided he hated his nurse, a Turkish woman, so much that one day he started insulting her in French, which she didn't understand. The nurse thought, because Peter kept saying "*Chienne, chienne*," he meant he wanted the channel changed on the television set beside the bed. I looked down at the table feeling momentarily guilty of my smile, then fingered my necktie, blue silk with tiny white dots.

I was surprised to see Glenn looking calm and rested. I felt both miserable and uneasy, having helped Peter's family with the details for the funeral. Glenn looked terrific, perhaps the best I had ever seen him: he had cut his light-brown hair short on the sides

and in the back, his complexion was clear and healthy, red at the cheeks, and in his dark, tailored suit and striped tied he looked like a preppy schoolboy who had just cut class.

"And you know about the last time he saw Kyle, don't you?"

"I didn't know they saw each other," I answered. "I thought they just spoke on the phone."

"When they were both in the mood."

"When did he see him?"

"Just a couple of weeks ago."

"He probably forgot to tell me about it."

"He didn't forget about it. He was too busy being cranky. 'I need the tissues by the bed,'" he said, mimicking the way Peter would demand things. "'You know this soup is too hot for me. But I don't want to watch *Casablanca* on TV.'"

I laughed again. In the last few months, when Peter wasn't in the hospital, Glenn had stayed at Peter's apartment during the mornings and afternoons, helping with the cleaning, cooking, shopping, and laundry; I had helped out at night, after work. Both of us had tried to keep Peter comfortable: he had dropped a lot of weight, the medications made him drowsy and incoherent at times, and he had lost a great deal of mobility because of the pains in his legs, the cause of which a squad of doctors and specialists couldn't discover or control. And every day we tried to keep him entertained, never an easy feat even when he was well. Many times we were both driven close to tears by Peter's bitterness over being sick, the constant stress of trying to relieve his anxieties, and our own helplessness and confusion, watching our friend grow weaker and weaker day by day. Suddenly I felt an odd tranquility: a peculiar combination of sadness, reprieve, and lightness from drinking a beer on an empty stomach so early in the day.

"His nurse, the one that came to his apartment, told me it was because of the steroids," I said. "She said, if he was cranky before he started them, they would only make it worse."

A waiter approached the table, and we ordered another round

of drinks. "Why is it that all the beauty in New York seems to be wasted on the waiters?" Glenn asked as we watched our waiter, muscular and quite handsome with a dark moustache as wide as a comb, rock his hips as though dancing as he glided behind the bar.

"He wasn't just cranky before," Glenn said to me, though his attention was still focused on the waiter. "He was always particular. I mean, remember the time he canceled his subscription to the opera because they started to flash subtitles above the stage?"

The waiter returned to the table and placed the drinks on top of fresh napkins, scooping the empty glasses and bottle up with one hand. Glenn looked up and smiled. The waiter caught his eye and grinned, somewhat embarrassed, and asked, "Anything else?"

"Just a lot of wishes," Glenn said, lifting his martini glass in the air and shaking it lightly. The waiter made an uncomfortable bow and departed again toward the bar.

"Anyway, Kyle had been sick for a long time, almost two years," Glenn said, and replaced his drink on top of the napkin. "At that point he was worse off than Peter. He had just gotten out of the hospital a few days earlier. And he was just like Peter: the type that couldn't sit still. Well, it must have been like ten o'clock in the morning, and Peter was already in a bad mood, because he hadn't been able to keep any of his breakfast down. I was washing the dishes when Kyle called and said he was coming over. You should have seen the look of surprise on Peter's face. He made me stop what I was doing and find him a clean shirt and clean underwear, pick up the sheets from the floor, make the bed, and put new batteries in the electric razor. The whole time Peter kept mumbling, 'He's never going to make it here; he'll change his mind when he gets to the corner; he'll never make it up the stairs.' About an hour later the buzzer rings, and I tell Peter I'll go down and help Kyle up the stairs. Well, Peter started going wild and said that if Kyle had enough energy to walk around the block from his apartment,

he could certainly make it up five flights of stairs without any help, and it would only make him mad if someone offered to help him. I mean, I could tell Peter was a little angry because he hadn't had the energy to go out of the apartment in almost a week. So we both sat on the sofa and waited. And waited. About thirty minutes later there was this soft knock on the door."

"How did Kyle look?"

"He was real thin," Glenn replied. "He had always been a little on the chubby side, but his arms had gotten so skinny he looked like one of those people I used to make with my dad's pipe cleaners when I was a kid. He looked worse than Peter ever did. He had lost most of his hair, but he had grown a beard. It made his face look so dark and glum.

"Anyway, he was standing in the doorway wobbling back and forth, and the first words out of his mouth are, 'I think I'm going to faint.' But he makes it over to the chair near the television by himself, and he sits down. Peter wouldn't get up, because he didn't want Kyle to know he had to use a cane to walk. So they sat and talked a while: Kyle said his roommate had set up a computer for him on a rolling tray so he could play video games in bed, and Peter started remembering about the time they missed the bus coming back from Atlantic City because he couldn't pull Kyle away from the nickel slot machines. Then they both started complaining about their doctors and medicines. And then Kyle gets up and turns on the TV. Well, of course Kyle turned the channel to MTV, which I could tell made Peter livid, because, you know him, if it wasn't pre-1960 or British it wasn't worth watching. But they sat there and talked some more.

"They seemed fine, so I told them I was going out to run some errands," Glenn continued. "I had to get Peter's new prescription filled at the pharmacy, and I thought they might like some time alone. I must have been gone for about an hour, and when I got back, they were both gone. No note. Nothing. Well, I sort of panicked—I mean, these were not two young men in prime-time

health. I even looked out the window, just to make sure they hadn't jumped. Nothing. I never thought they could have made it down the stairs and out of sight before I got back."

"How did Peter make it down the stairs?"

"He told me he had to help Kyle down."

"What?"

"They were sort of like balancing each other. And Peter didn't even take his cane. When one wobbled, the other one sort of wobbled the other way."

"I can't believe it."

"Anyway, I was kind of worried. I thought about calling someone, but who do I call? 'Hello, police, I'd like to report two missing homosexuals.' Then I thought maybe one of them had collapsed. If Kyle had needed help, Peter would have called an ambulance. If it were Peter, he would probably still have been on the floor. I didn't think it possible both of them would need to go to the hospital. So I went across the hall and asked that Hispanic lady if she had seen them. If anything had happened, she would be the first to know. But she hadn't seen them. So I went back inside and called Kyle's number, thinking maybe they had gone there, but there wasn't any answer."

"What did you do?"

"I just waited. About two hours later the buzzer rang, and when I listened, it was Peter yelling for some money."

"Money?"

"It seems the two of them had gone for a cab ride, but neither of them had any money."

"Where did they go?"

"To the park. They drove around Central Park for two hours!"

"But Peter hated Central Park."

"Well, by the time I got downstairs with some money Peter was fuming. He had dropped Kyle off at his apartment. He had one of those cab drivers who don't speak English, and he kept telling the cab driver to go up the stairs and buzz the apartment so he could

get paid. Anyway, Peter got so frustrated he opened the door of the cab and literally crawled up the steps to ring the buzzer. And the whole time this cab driver, who must have been just off the boat from South America, was flapping his arms and screaming, 'Pay me trip. Pay me trip.'"

"How much did the cab cost?"

"Too much! And Peter didn't want to tip the driver, because he was 'a first-class idiot.' I calmed the cab driver down, paid him, and helped Peter up the stairs. He complained the whole time. He said that after I left to go shopping, Kyle decided he was hungry, so he went into the kitchen and found the chocolate-chip ice cream in the freezer and sat down in front of the TV and ate the whole pint. And he was still hungry. So they decided to go down to the store on the corner to get some more. By the time they got to the bottom of the stairs, Kyle was huffing and puffing so much that they couldn't go anywhere, not even back up the stairs. So they flagged down a cab, but the driver wouldn't take them a half a block. So Kyle decided they should drive through Central Park."

Glenn pushed aside his empty glass. "On top of it all, the driver had no idea where anything in the city was. When Kyle said 'Central Park,' the cab driver must have thought he meant 'Centre Street,' because they started heading downtown. When Peter realized they were heading in the wrong direction, he started tapping the driver on the shoulder and saying 'No, No,' which got the driver real annoyed. He finally got the driver to turn around, but by the time they got to the park, Kyle had fallen asleep."

"What?"

"He kept falling asleep. They drove all through the park, and Peter kept nudging Kyle because he was sleeping with his head on Peter's shoulder and hurting his arm. Kyle would wake up for a minute and then pass out again. When Peter told the driver to take them back, he got lost again. They ended up on the West Side Highway. So, two hours later, the cab pulled up in front of Kyle's apartment, and Peter woke him up and helped him to the

door and then told the driver to take him around the corner to his apartment. But you want to know what made Peter really furious?" Glenn asked.

"What?"

"That Kyle had eaten all of his ice cream. The reason he had agreed so hastily to go to the store with Kyle was because he was afraid Kyle would also eat the butterscotch cake Suzanne made for him. Imagine, two dying *faygelehs* riding through Central Park, one mad because the other had eaten all of his ice cream, the other so oblivious to everything he simply falls asleep, with a driver who doesn't even know what the hell he's doing. Two hours later I'm sure they all forgot they had even seen each other."

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A week after Peter saw Kyle, Kyle died. Peter died less than a month later. Six months later I sat in a restaurant telling my friend Larry this story. We had both been drinking steadily for over an hour since we finished eating, and as we were leaving I waited with him at the corner to make sure he caught a cab. Watching him drive away, I was again baffled by the absurd uncertainty which had crept into my life. Glenn had gone quickly. Overnight. A cold had turned into pneumonia. Two days later he was dead. The last time I had seen him was the day of Peter's funeral, when he told me the story about the cab ride through Central Park. Walking uptown to my apartment, I remembered the way Peter would turn to me after we had walked out of a movie or a play or a restaurant and shove his hands deeply into his pants pockets and shrug his shoulders, knowing he was not yet ready to go home, and say, "Whatever should we do next?"

Montebello View

Jerry's hands were cold and chapped, and his arms, folded lightly across his chest, ached from his fingers to the joints of his shoulders. He wore his high-school basketball jacket, now too small for the width of his back, and the seams of the sleeves cut through his sweatshirt and pinched the skin underneath his arms. He slumped down farther into the seat of the van, the leather cracking as it rubbed against the vinyl cushion, and he shifted his hips so the weight of his body pressed more comfortably against the base of his spine.

"She won't remember any of it tomorrow," Ethan said, his eyes pinned straight ahead as he drove through the snow.

"Doesn't matter," Jerry replied, and looked out the side window. It was late afternoon and the snow, which had been falling since early morning, had transformed the bleakness of the highway into ribbons of black and white. Jerry watched a red Chevy move slowly in the lane beside him, the driver's face appearing and disappearing as the snow rose and flurried between the cars. Even now Jerry felt Ethan's mother, Mrs. Moeller, watching them from the window of her sixteenth-floor apartment in Virginia, jiggling her ice cubes in her glass the way two loose bolts were rattling across the empty metal floor of the van.

Last night the van had been loaded with Ethan's furniture: a sofa bed, a table, three chairs, and several stacks of boxes. This morning Jerry and Ethan had made at least twelve trips in the elevator,

moving the furniture from the van to an empty room in Mrs. Moeller's apartment. They had finished before noon, and Ethan's mother, after spending the morning in front of a mirror applying layers of makeup, entered the crowded room and ran the tip of her finger across the dust of the table. "I never approved of the way you lived," she sighed, and jiggled the ice cubes in the glass she carried in her other hand. Jerry left the room before his anger could erupt, retreating to Ethan's bedroom to repack his overnight bag.

Jerry had not always resented Mrs. Moeller. When the phone calls began, he was at first sympathetic. Mrs. Moeller would call and tell Ethan she had slipped and twisted her ankle, and while trying to phone the doctor she had dropped and shattered a glass. Ethan, two hundred miles away, would stiffen his back and panic. He would try desperately to reach a doctor or an ambulance by long distance. Once, when she called at three o'clock in the morning, Jerry answered and Mrs. Moeller began to scream when she heard his voice. Though they had never met, Mrs. Moeller accused Jerry one night on the phone of taking her to India, where she had contracted dysentery. Before Jerry could wake Ethan and hand him the phone, Mrs. Moeller was crying because she thought she had broken her hip.

"She only does it because she wants attention," Jerry had said to Ethan the next morning. "She has nothing else to do, so she invents these bruises and diseases so you'll come running to her."

"The doctor said she's started to have blackouts," Ethan replied. That weekend he took the train to spend time with his mother.

Jerry had imagined several other ways it would end: another man, maybe a woman, perhaps a heart attack or pneumonia, or even by accident or an Act of God. Sometimes he expected, perhaps, a subconscious economic distinction might pull them apart. He never expected he would lose Ethan because of his mother's health. Since November, Ethan had traveled every weekend from New York to Washington. Now, two months later, a doctor had told Ethan his mother needed constant care.

Jerry expected more of a fight from Ethan; for years his mother had barely spoken to him, because she disapproved of his homosexuality, and now, wealthy from owning the apartment building she lived in, she could afford to hire a live-in nurse or move to a nursing home. Perhaps Ethan expected more of a fight from Jerry, a refusal to help move the furniture or a rage of hysterics at feeling suddenly abandoned. After all, Ethan had said his mother had been dying for years. She had always been arthritic or anemic and complained of migraines and fevers. When Ethan was a teenager, Mrs. Moeller had both a hysterectomy and a mastectomy in the same year. Now a doctor said she had suffered a series of minor strokes, and if she continued to drink and smoke, she risked the possibility of heart surgery. Last night, when they reached the outskirts of Washington, Jerry had wondered what would have kept Ethan from moving. If Jerry were sick, would Ethan have decided to stay?

The van smelled of cigarettes, though neither of them smoked, and a thin, dry taste pressed and scratched at the back of Jerry's mouth. He cleared his throat and the sound made Ethan avert his stare momentarily from the highway. Earlier today, Ethan had suggested, since Jerry was tired, maybe he should consider spending an extra day before returning to Manhattan. Jerry said he wanted to get back to the city, he had to be at work tomorrow, and the apartment needed cleaning and rearranging. Jerry told Ethan he could drop him off at a subway stop in Washington, on their way to the garage where they were to return the rented van. Jerry had decided, because of the snow, it would be easier for him to take the subway to the train station. Ethan could take a taxi back to his mother's apartment; Jerry would catch up on his sleep on the trip back to New York.

Last night, Jerry had had trouble falling asleep. At first he thought it was a repercussion of driving so long in the tumbling van, the way his body had once felt numb and unsteady from riding a roller coaster too many times. Then he thought it might be

the bed he shared with Ethan; the mattress was lumpy and much smaller than their own. Jerry got out of bed and wandered about Mrs. Moeller's darkened apartment. In the kitchen, while rinsing a cup he had used to make tea, he finally recognized what had been troubling him all day. Jerry and Ethan had only been lovers for eleven months. For years Jerry had lived alone. He had just gotten used to being with Ethan, depending on and being depended upon, planning and sharing, and now, he realized, he had already begun to distance himself from Ethan. It began when they loaded the van in New York; Jerry's only words had been perfunctory remarks about what to carry and how to pack. The trip in the van had been mostly in silence, broken only by the confusion over which exit to take. Jerry was sure Ethan had sensed the withdrawal, and Ethan had tried to bridge the chasm when he unlocked the door of his mother's apartment.

"We have to leave our shoes by the door," Ethan said, his voice whispery and light, as if he had just delivered the punch line of a joke. "White," he added when he flipped on a lamp and pointed to the carpet.

Ethan placed his shoes against the wall behind the door. Jerry left his a little farther away, underneath a glass-topped table. Mrs. Moeller had not waited up to greet them, and Ethan pressed a finger to his lips as he led Jerry through the rooms of the apartment.

"You have to see the view," Ethan whispered and walked to a wall of white curtains. He drew them open and unlocked a panel of sliding glass doors. Outside, on a large, glass-enclosed terrace, Jerry stood in his socks atop another soft, white carpet.

"See the monument?" Ethan said, and Jerry looked in the direction he pointed. The view was astonishing, an evening panorama of flickering lights.

"No," Jerry answered, following the deep-black gap of the Potomac toward a cluster of lights.

"The one with the red blinking light," Ethan said, and Jerry looked and then nodded.

Late in the night Ethan found Jerry lying on the floor of the carpeted terrace, staring at the view, his head propped up by a cushion from the sofa. Without a word Ethan stretched out behind him and wrapped his arms around Jerry's waist. Jerry felt Ethan's breath brush against the side of his neck as Ethan pulled their bodies tighter together. Jerry thought it odd how firm Ethan's grasp felt; usually Jerry was the one clutching and holding. He wondered if Ethan really did not want him to go. There, lying so close to each other, Jerry had smelled, in rapid succession, the odor of Ethan's hair and breath and skin. Jerry felt his strength, his detachment, chemically decomposing as the warmth of Ethan's body began to envelop him. He closed his eyes and imagined himself somewhere else, perhaps a bird flying above, taking in the entire view. But he was unable to keep his distance; Ethan kept shifting his grasp, and Jerry, wanting to know what he should be feeling, kept flying in closer and closer for some sort of sign.

This morning, when Jerry awoke still on the floor, Ethan was no longer beside him, and the view from the terrace had disappeared behind the falling snow.

○

"You're not at all what I imagined," Mrs. Moeller said when she first saw Jerry. Jerry was seated in a wicker chair on the terrace. Ethan was in the kitchen making breakfast. They had not yet begun to unload the van. Mrs. Moeller shuffled onto the terrace in furry pink slippers.

"I had hoped you'd be short, dumpy, and balding," she said, and jiggled the ice cubes in her cocktail glass as she walked. Jerry stood as she approached, but Mrs. Moeller turned her back on him abruptly, and pinched the top flaps of her pink bathrobe together with two fingers, as though shyly trying to conceal her breasts. Her shrug, so feminine and partial, made Jerry, in his sweatshirt, jeans, and work boots, feel awkward and out of place. He shoved his

hands into the back pockets of his jeans, not knowing what else to do. A soft gray light filtered through the windows. Outside, snow was spinning furiously in currents of air.

"I bet it's even snowing in Miami," she said.

Mrs. Moeller was not what Jerry had envisioned either. He was surprised to find she was close to six feet tall, almost as tall as himself and Ethan. He had imagined a short, frail woman to match the thin, reedy voice he had heard on the phone for months, and would not have been disappointed to have found her plump and matronly. Instead, Mrs. Moeller stood steady and proud before the windows, and seemed not at all a woman who had just turned seventy, or a woman who was continuously dying. Her eyes were tiny gray circles, and though she wore not a trace of makeup, her skin glowed at the crests of her cheekbones as though she had applied rouge. Her hair, dyed white and curled in long, thin waves, snaked around her head and disappeared beneath the collar of her robe.

Ethan entered the terrace carrying a tray of food: plates of omelets, toast, jelly, butter, milk, and orange juice.

"I can't eat that garbage," Mrs. Moeller yelled at Ethan as he placed the tray on the table in the corner of the terrace.

"I thought we'd eat out here," Ethan said calmly, and began arranging the table.

Mrs. Moeller turned again, abruptly toward Jerry, and spoke. "I don't know why I still buy that stuff. I can't eat eggs because of the cholesterol. I can't eat wheat bread because I'm allergic to it. When I drink milk it makes my stomach feel like a meat grinder."

"So why don't you just drink yourself into a stupor while we eat," Ethan said matter-of-factly.

Jerry almost laughed at Ethan's remark, but caught himself by coughing.

"Do you have a cigarette?" Mrs. Moeller asked Jerry.

"No," Jerry answered.

"Just ignore her," Ethan said.

"I hope you live to see the day your children abuse you," she

screamed at Ethan.

"I don't intend to have children," Ethan replied.

"Then there is hope for the human race after all," she said. "At least we won't be overrun with whiny little faggots."

"Enough, Mother," Ethan said without raising his voice. "Did you take your pill?"

"I'm not supposed to drink when I take that thing," she said.

"That's the point," Ethan responded.

"It's like swallowing a knife," she said to Jerry. She walked to the table and poured a swig of orange juice into her glass and then walked to the other side of the terrace to a liquor cabinet and opened a bottle of vodka.

"Did Ethan give you a tour?" Mrs. Moeller asked in a bright, little-girl intonation as she crossed to the other side of the terrace again, wobbling slightly as her slippers dug into the carpet.

"Yes," Jerry answered. "You have a beautiful apartment."

Mrs. Moeller leaned across the table and wiped a finger over the top of a stick of butter and then slipped her finger into her mouth.

"This apartment is the exact same size as the house. Only sixteen floors higher. I miss the house," she sighed, and sat down in one of the chairs. "I miss George and Fred and Dina. I even miss that damn dachshund I had." She twisted one hand around her other wrist as though adjusting a bracelet. "But I made sure I kept the view."

Last night, as they lay on the carpet watching the lights, Ethan had told Jerry his family had owned Montebello Hill for over a century. After his father died, his mother remarried and her second husband convinced her to build the condominium tower, but died of a heart attack before the construction was completed. As Jerry lay on the floor, listening to Ethan's story, Ethan slipped his hands beneath Jerry's shirt and gently began stroking the hair on Jerry's chest.

Mrs. Moeller stood and walked to the window again. "I can spend hours just watching. My grandfather used to keep horses

in the north pasture." She cupped her elbow with the palm of her free hand and lifted her glass till it rested against her chin. Jerry thought he noticed her tilt her head slightly as she stared through the windows, as though she had found a passage through the obstruction of the snow and had paused, contentedly, at a view of her memory. "Now there's a Howard Johnson's there," she said. "You never have to change, the world will do it for you." She moved her hand through the waves of her hair and let it rest when it reached the side of her neck. "I can't feel a pulse," she turned and said to Ethan, but he ignored her, eating a slice of toast and reading the paper. "NOTHING!" she turned and screamed at Jerry. "NOTHING!"

Jerry, momentarily frightened and concerned, walked over to Mrs. Moeller and placed his hand against her neck. Her skin felt warm and damp, like a tea bag before it is thrown in the trash. "I can feel it," Jerry said.

Mrs. Moeller's face turned angry and she pushed his hand away. "What else do I have to tolerate?" she asked. She started to walk away but suddenly dropped to the floor, landing in a muffled thump on her knees; the glass and ice which she held silently tumbled across the carpet. Instantly Ethan was out of his chair and knelt in front of her. Jerry stepped back, watching in horror. Ethan slipped his arms around his mother and kept her from falling completely over.

"I just want a cigarette," she whispered to Ethan.

She nestled her head against Ethan's shoulder and looked up at Jerry. "I live for the moments that I feel well."

❍

Ahead, a portion of the highway was closed, and a man in a bright-orange parka waved the traffic toward a ramp. Ethan steered the van around the small windblown snow dunes and followed the cars to the top of the ramp. The snowing had stopped but the light

which filtered through the steel-colored clouds was quickly fading; night had started etching the landscape with shadows. Through the window of the van, Jerry watched the highway disappear as they drove down a road and into the suburbs. He noticed, behind the houses which flashed into view, an open field blanketed by snow. As the road curved, the field burst into full view, and Jerry saw a group of children huddled together in the distance, at the top of a slope, bundled in bright coats and scarves, pushing each other to the bottom on sleds and metal trash-can tops.

On the other side of the field, a girl waving her red-mittened hands above her head distracted Jerry and he watched the ragged ends of her blue scarf bounce with her movements. When Jerry saw a tiny figure moving toward her, he realized the girl was a woman and the smaller figure a child. Briefly, Jerry thought of his own mother, and the way, when he had been a child, she would bend over him and her long, thin hands would lace up his boots.

Jerry's mother, like Mrs. Moeller, had that pure, pale, almost translucent skin. Jerry had inherited his father's Mediterranean complexion, and his father's height and agility and large-boned bulk. As a child Jerry had felt he was a source of disappointment to his parents. He stuttered, had dyslexia, and flunked second grade. At night, his mother, after drying her wet hands on her apron, would sit with him at the kitchen table, and help him read aloud his assignments from school. When, at twelve, he suddenly began to grow, his father would take him every night to the park not far from the factory where he worked, and there taught Jerry how to dribble and shoot baskets. "It's your ticket out of here," Jerry's father had said, tossing a basketball between his palms. The day he left Pittsburgh on a college athletic scholarship, Jerry felt he had finally made his parents proud, but a few months later, when he returned home for a weekend, he sensed the disappointment again as he sat down at the kitchen table and announced that he was gay. His mother had bowed her head in shock and then started crying. His father had stood, confused, and left the room. Later,

that night, his mother came into his bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. She rubbed her hands together, as if they were still wet, placed them in her lap, and then calmly asked, "Who do we need to talk to try to understand?" Now, miles away, riding in the van, he suddenly felt close to her, missed her, loved her.

At a stoplight, Jerry turned and noticed Ethan's profile and the way his fine blond hair fluttered in the wind which rushed in through a crack in the window. Ethan had the aloof good looks of the wealthy boy down the street, the kind someone could not help noticing and admiring, the kind with that smooth, hairless, athletic edge, and the remote, faraway gaze of a mannequin. Once, while waiting in line to see a movie, Jerry had thought Ethan, standing there, looked like a model he had noticed in a magazine, and then thought he and Ethan must seem such an unlikely couple, himself so different: dark, swarthy, almost ethnic-looking—working-class next to well-to-do. Mitch, Ethan's lover before Jerry, had once said it was difficult for him to detect Ethan's moods: he was too easily distracted by Ethan's appearance. After months of living with Ethan, Jerry had finally learned how to judge Ethan's thoughts from the position of his eyebrows: raised, they might show surprise or excitement; angled, they could mean anxiety or anguish. Now Ethan's eyebrows were tensed toward the bridge of his nose, and Jerry knew that, though Ethan's concentration was on driving, his thoughts had escaped to another place.

Seven years ago Jerry met Ethan at a party in a loft in Soho. They had both recently graduated from college and settled in Manhattan. Jerry, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, had been tending bar, pouring, stirring, and shaking drinks for a roomful of rowdy, overdressed men. When Ethan approached for a drink, Jerry looked up from a tray of lemon wedges he had been slicing and said, "Scotch and soda?"

"How did you know?" Ethan asked.

"Instincts," Jerry answered. "You can tell who drinks what after a while."

That night, Ethan waited and took Jerry home after the party. Though they had a few dates and occasional sex, the relationship that developed was one of friendship. Two months later, at a bar in the West Village, Jerry introduced Ethan to Mitch. Jerry and Mitch had been roommates in college. Mitch and Ethan became lovers. Two years ago, Mitch made a doctor's appointment when he noticed a bruise near his ankle. Ten months later he was dead. One night, while sharing a cab after visiting Mitch in the hospital, Jerry suggested that Ethan could move into the second bedroom of his apartment if necessary. It was a simple gesture of friendship; he knew Ethan had no necessity to move: no financial worries, no legal entanglements. Jerry had merely suggested the idea in case Ethan was afraid of being alone. Four months later Ethan moved in.

Jerry had always been aware that he and Ethan had become lovers out of need instead of passion. And he had been aware, too, that Mitch's death had had a greater impact than initiating his relationship with Ethan. Now, having just reached thirty, Jerry found himself continually afraid: afraid of growing old, of living alone; afraid of illness and death, of telling Ethan how he felt about anything; afraid even of such silly things as aspirin, pork, and too much caffeine. When Jerry and Ethan began to live together, Jerry had felt layers of himself unfolding, as though an archeologist had unearthed an ancient civilization. Jerry had spent years building up his defenses, assembling lists of things he liked and disliked doing by himself, knowing how to live alone without being lonely. But it had been an amazing thing for Jerry to come home from work and find Ethan cooking or exercising or playing the piano. Though he had had a string of boyfriends, Jerry had never had a lover. And as an only child, he had not had a roommate since Mitch in college. Slowly, Jerry had come to rely on Ethan to be there, and the briefest, most unexpected thing could make Jerry instantly and profoundly happy. Then once, not long ago, at another party, this one on the Upper West Side, Ethan was laughing and talking with a friend and said in a casual manner that Jerry had inherited

him from Mitch. Jerry, who stood beside Ethan, was struck with a sudden discomfort. He knew but had never recognized that in loving Ethan he was also loving the memory of Mitch.

Jerry had met Mitch his freshman year in college. In the last row of psychology class, Mitch would create puzzles and quizzes and hand them to Jerry to solve. After class, Mitch would suggest how Jerry should cut his hair, what clothes he should buy, and how they should be worn. Jerry smoked his first joint with Mitch; Mitch took Jerry to his first gay bar. Jerry felt Mitch's friendship was a carnival that could never end. Mitch was *always* there, his every idea full of inspiration. Mitch improvised their summers at the beach and supervised their late-night trials with Quaaludes and speed. It surprised Jerry, then, one night last week, when Ethan said Mitch had thought it odd that everyone expected him to lead the way, when in fact, he had confessed to Ethan shortly before his death, he felt he had been a poor guide.

Ethan slowed the van and shifted to a lower gear, approaching an icy turn with deliberate caution. Jerry placed his hand against the dashboard for balance. It seemed remarkable to Jerry that there was nothing in the expression on Ethan's face to suggest that he had once loved Mitch. The only time Jerry remembered Ethan crying was the night Mitch died. Ethan and Jerry had been sitting on the couch, waiting for the police and the coroner to arrive, when Ethan had suddenly leaned his head against Jerry's shoulder and begun crying. Jerry, instinctively, had put his arms around Ethan and pulled him tightly against his chest. Months later it occurred to Jerry that Ethan must have transferred his depression to Jerry that night, as though his tears, seeping through the T-shirt Jerry wore, had moistened and weakened Jerry's heart. Now, in the van, Jerry could only feel the cold air and a vacant space in his chest. Ethan turned onto an empty street but accelerated too quickly, and the rear of the van skidded across a patch of ice and drifted, politely, into a bank of snow.

❍

"What the hell?" Mrs. Moeller screamed. A loud thud had rocked one of the terrace windows.

"A bird," Ethan said, and was instantly beside the window. "It must have been a bird."

Jerry joined them at the window, though the view before him resembled static on a giant TV screen. "I've never seen a bird fly in the snow," he said.

"The world is ending," Mrs. Moeller remarked, and padded across the carpet to the liquor cabinet.

Ethan ran his hand down Jerry's back, and Jerry felt him pause and slip a finger around a belt loop of his jeans. Jerry turned away from the window so that Ethan's gestures were hidden from his mother, and then twisted his own hand around Ethan's. Ethan lifted their hands underneath the back of Jerry's sweatshirt, still damp from moving boxes this morning. Jerry felt their hands relax and heat the cool, wet spot at the center of his lower back. The touch reminded Jerry of the mornings, after showering, when he would shave in front of the mirror, and how Ethan would place his hand on Jerry's back as he edged his way around the tiny bathroom they shared. At first Jerry was worried Mrs. Moeller might react violently to their public affection, but in the passion of the moment he decided he wouldn't care. Mrs. Moeller had changed into a sky-blue satin kimono, and her hair was concealed beneath a bright-red wig, her complexion now powdered to match the color of the snow.

"I thought your hair used to be light brown," Mrs. Moeller said to Jerry. She weaved as she paced around the terrace, and her words had begun to slur together. "Did you dye it?"

"That was Mitch, Mother," Ethan said without flinching.

"Mitch?" his mother questioned, and pouted her lips at Ethan. "I can't remember anything I've done in a day." She looked at Jerry. "Tomorrow I won't even remember you." She walked away and sat on the sofa. "What ever happened to Mitch?" she asked, and twirled a finger through her cocktail.

"He's dead," Ethan answered, and stroked Jerry's skin with the tips of his fingers.

She squinted her eyes. "Was it quick and painless?"

"No," Ethan replied. "For once, Mother dear, you don't have a monopoly on pain."

"Pity," she said, and placed her hand on her breast. "Nothing seems real except the pain. If my son had been a doctor instead of a faggot, maybe I wouldn't feel it so much."

Jerry felt his body flush with indignation, and would have shouted an obscenity and left the room had Ethan not unraveled their grasp and yelled at his mother, "What have I done to make you feel so ashamed of me?"

"It's disgusting what two men will do to each other," she yelled back.

"It's not what they do together that disgusts you, Mother," Ethan said, his voice more composed but still exasperated. "It's what they feel together that really disgusts you. You were the same way with Dina after she got married. You couldn't stand seeing someone happy when you weren't. Sometimes I regret I was never what you wanted me to be. But what makes you think I was born to save the world, or, better yet, born to save you from the world? Why do I feel you're trying to blame me because you found out one day Dad didn't love you anymore?"

"I never understood," she sighed, and rattled the ice cubes in her glass. "Turn on the radio. Maybe the world will cheer us up."

❍

It took almost an hour to get the van out of the bank of snow. Jerry shredded old newspapers and gathered twigs and placed them under the wheels, rocking the van with as much strength as he could find while Ethan kept shifting from first to reverse. The van would lurch forward but the rear wheels would spin futilely, sending gray-colored slush into the evening sky like fireworks.

Finally, with the help of two men from a nearby house, they pushed the van back onto the street.

Last night, as they lay on the floor, Ethan had slipped Jerry's clothes off and slowly began massaging and kissing Jerry's body. Jerry, too, had undressed Ethan, and the sensation of their skin rubbing together had been magically electric. Jerry felt that perhaps it was the first time he had captured Ethan's passion since that first night, years ago, in Manhattan, when their sex had had such a raw, anonymous edge. But later, deeper in the night, Ethan, his head resting on Jerry's chest, had said, "You know, Jerry, I *do* love you." Jerry, once again trying to soar high above the room, had felt Ethan's voice resonating through his body.

"I'm sorry," Jerry said when they were driving again.

Ethan turned and gave Jerry a quick, confused look. "It wasn't your fault. You can't apologize for the snow."

"No," Jerry answered. "About your mom."

Before they left to drop Jerry off, Jerry had said to Ethan's mother, "I told him he shouldn't do this. I don't want him to do this. And he doesn't have to do this. Maybe you won't remember me, but I hope you'll at least remember that this is his choice." Jerry had no intention of hurting Mrs. Moeller, and he did his best to hide his anger and sorrow beneath a soft, restrained voice.

Mrs. Moeller narrowed her eyes and Jerry noticed a flicker of discomfort, then, briefly, regret. "I don't know why I hate you so," she said. "I don't know why you hate me. Are we enemies because we both love my son?"

When they reached the Arlington Bridge, Jerry looked up through the windshield and saw the red blinking lights of the Washington Monument. They drove through the city in silence, and Jerry thought it strange the world could seem so peaceful simply because it was buried beneath layers of snow. He turned again and looked at Ethan. Sometimes it embarrassed Jerry to realize how many years he had spent thinking of Ethan as a friend or like a brother, and, now, how he had come to understand he had

always loved Ethan differently, more urgently, than anyone else in his life. On Connecticut Avenue, Ethan pulled the van over to the curb and stopped. Jerry tapped his feet against the floor of the van and felt the cold and the melted snow biting its way through his boots. He flexed his toes to see if they were wet. Ethan leaned his head against the top of the steering wheel.

Jerry was upset, unable to leave the car. At times he had felt that Ethan had spent years pushing him away. He wanted, now, some concrete reason why their relationship had never worked: was it the way he looked, the way he moved, the way he had been raised, or perhaps, even, his thick, cumbersome voice?

"I'm scared," Ethan said, still clutching the steering wheel.

Jerry looked through the side window of the van, not wanting to wonder if Ethan still knew how to cry.

"My doctor wants me to start AZT next week."

"I'll come down if you want me to," Jerry replied, and clutched the bag beside him on the seat.

"Not yet," Ethan answered.

"I don't feel right leaving you," Jerry said.

"We'll still see each other."

"I know. But it's not the same."

"Jerry," Ethan whispered. "Don't make this more difficult."

"You never gave me a chance," Jerry said, and opened the door of the van, and the rush of cold air felt as bitter as heartbreak. In a few weeks Mrs. Moeller would find out Ethan was sick. In a year she would bury him beside her two husbands. Jerry twisted his feet toward the door, crouched, and balanced himself on the ledge of the van. As he jumped toward the curb he felt he had thrown himself into space, till he grasped the image of Mrs. Moeller kneeling on the floor, her arms curled around Ethan like a madonna cradling her child. Jerry landed quietly and reluctantly in the snow, turned, and closed the door of the van without saying goodbye. Years from now he knew he would remember this moment: the pain of his feet sinking in the snow, treading with desperation to find the stability

of the cement; the sound of the branches of the trees snapping and crackling from the weight of the ice; the stale, wet smell of the wool scarf he wore around his neck; and the dry, ashen taste which hovered in the back of his throat. Jerry knew he had to respect Ethan's decision; had fate dealt the cards differently, he, too, might have returned home. The light from a street lamp shivered across the snow. At the subway entrance, the last thing he noticed before heading underground was a digital clock atop a building across the street, blinking from 7:48 to 7:49.

Pasta Night

I don't remember when I began cooking so much. Nathan was always the one of us who cooked, but now I found myself helpless with so much restless time on my hands, unable to stop silently worrying about the prospect of Nathan's health, and unable, really, to concentrate on anything else. Unwilling to return to work and with Mrs. Solloway usurping the cleaning chores, I began roaming the aisles of the grocery store, bringing home heavy brown bags of cans and jars of gourmet sauces, protein-enriched breads, plastic-wrapped vegetables, and vitamins and herbs. I knew nothing about cooking; nothing more than how to fry a hamburger or a grilled cheese sandwich or, perhaps, how to heat a frozen entree or reheat a slice of pizza. The kitchen had always been Nathan's domain; I had never cultivated the patience for cooking.

At first I began by cooking large pots of pasta, then progressed to throwing fruits, milk, ice cream, and protein powder into a blender to create shakes, then, more boldly, experimented with pureeing broccoli, asparagus, and potatoes into soups. Food was what would save Nathan, I had decided; we had, by then, lost too many friends already from the inadequacy of medicine. Nathan was amused when I would walk into the bedroom and say, "Try this sauce, I just made it," and that delight is what sustained me when I returned to the kitchen to cook something else. Food had become a new weapon in our war; hope could be created out of weight and mass.

Nathan had been sent home from the hospital with a stash of prescriptions: Compazine for his stomach, Nizoral for the thrush in his mouth, Cyclovir for the herpes sore on his chin. Dr. Nyquist had also given him prescriptions for Halcion and Xanax, for help with sleeping and anxiety, and had also started Nathan on a four-hour cycle of a new drug which was just completing clinical trials—Retrovir, soon to be more commonly known as AZT. Whether it was these medications that made him better, my cooking, or my prayers, I am not sure, but he did grow stronger daily. Nathan's mother went back to Hartford, friends calmed down, I went back to work, and Nathan was faced with being a man who was living with an HIV infection and diagnosed with AIDS.

I tried, at first, to find a regimen for us to maintain: a trip to the gym or working out in the morning at home, vitamins, medicine, work, monitoring his temperature and breathing and lymph nodes—all a way to keep disorder from breaking through our lives again. I thought that if I kept a list of things I had to do during the day, to remind Nathan, for instance, that he should look into other therapies, such as vitamin C injections, or a consult an herbalist whom a friend of a friend had gone to in Chinatown, things would seem rational, logical, and ordered, that I had a handle on things, when, of course, there is nothing rational about a life-threatening illness. Frailty shines through life like light through a crystal, only the colors are distorted and frightening when seen in this way. Nathan and I tried to work it out in his mind that he was not living with an illness but coexisting with a virus, but everything seemed to funnel into one fatalistic question: How much time did he have left?

And then a phone call came that Sam was back in the hospital, the KS had spread to his right lung and time was running out. Nathan had taken the call. Sam's mother had phoned that morning, and when I got home that afternoon Nathan was shaking with fright. "I can't go," he said, over and over, knowing he should go but couldn't—it would mean him facing his own mortality as well,

something he did with himself every day but did not want to have to do in front of someone else or be forced to do again in the corridor of a hospital.

"I'll go after dinner," I said, mentioning I would stop by the pharmacy first. I knew that in Nathan's mind I had resolved the matter, as if my going back to the hospital was proof there was nothing out of the ordinary to the call, that I would return with good news, that Sam had been given drugs and treatments, that he would be back home in a few days.

When I got to the hospital it was close to eight o'clock and I took the elevator to the room number Nathan had scribbled down on a slip of paper. When I got to the room Sam was not there, and his name was not listed on the wall beside the door, either; two other men occupied the room. I walked down to the nurses' station at the center of the floor to check the room number and asked the nurse on duty, a striking young Hispanic woman, what room Sam Karan was in. She seemed disturbed by my question, bowed her head, and said quietly. "Mr. Karan passed away early this afternoon," then backed away slightly from the counter.

Shocked, I found myself graciously bowing to her in reply, as if she had treated me with the utmost hospitality. I felt a scream growing inside me—a combination of fear and hate, and I backed myself away from the nurse, holding my breath until I reached the elevator. It opened almost immediately, and I stepped inside, my body at once relaxing as if I had reached a protective cocoon, and I followed a man out when I thought we had reached the ground floor. Instead, I was on an unfamiliar floor, and I realized my mistake almost instantly and stood by the elevator bank insistently pressing the call button for the elevator's return.

"I see you back," I heard a familiar-sounding voice speak behind me, and I turned and saw it was the Jamaican nurse I had met several times before.

She must have noticed the looks of horror and grief that were blended into my expression. "He went peacefully," she said. "His

brother was here with him." She took my hand and patted it, and I remember being struck by the heavy-looking silver rings she wore on each of her fingers. "Come," she said, and it was here that she motioned to me, as if she had been awaiting my arrival all day.

I followed her down the hall, around the corner and through a set of swinging doors. She led me into a large room with beds framed with steel criblike structures, white sheets tucked tightly into tiny mattresses. She handed me a small gauze mask that I slipped over my mouth. "This is Tina," she whispered through the mask she had slipped over her own face, motioning a finger to where her lips were, to indicate that I should stay quiet. In the bed a small, caramel-colored baby lay sleeping, an IV needle stuck into the heel of its foot. I looked abruptly around the room, struck by the quiet I had stepped into. There were babies in each of the cribs, one child was attached to a respirator; along the wall was a row of glass-encased incubators, one of which held a child the size of my palm. "This is Darren," she said, leading me to a bed where an eight month-old baby lay awake, looking skyward with dark chocolate eyes. She lifted him into her arms, rocking him into a smile. "All they want is to be held," she said, stretching her arms out for me to hold the baby. I hesitated, frightened by the baby, but his eyes looked up into mine and I instinctively took him into my arms. "His name is really Darryl, but I call him Darren, because I like that TV show so much." I nodded to her, rocking Darren in my arms. He opened and closed his fist and then relaxed his head against my chest.

"He's a miracle baby," she said. "The last month he's been testing negative."

Again I looked around the room, suddenly aware of where the nurse had led me. These babies had all been born HIV-positive. "They are not all so lucky as Darren," she said. "Tomorrow they're transferring him to Grove House."

"*Grove House*?" I asked.

"Martha Grove. In Harlem," she nodded as if I would

immediately recognize the name. "She keeps a house with babies."

She lifted Darren out of my arms. "Come with me," she said. "Mother Grove always need help. And bring your friend with you. I know he like the babies too."

❍

"It's a surprise," I said to Nathan, which was the only way I could guarantee him coming with me.

"Nothing surprises me anymore," he said flatly, following me up the gray concrete steps of a brownstone on the Upper West Side. It had been a difficult day for both of us; Nathan had been in a particularly stressful conference with a client, and when it was over he realized he had missed taking his AZT. Last night the news of Sam's death had shaken him and he was unable to fall asleep, sitting on the couch till four in the morning, trying to distract himself by reading. Now I had pulled him away from work early, after a day where I had taken a simple assignment—installing ceiling fans in a loft in Soho—and turned it into a fiasco by accidentally popping open an old sealed gas line.

I rang the buzzer and a stern, overweight black woman opened the door. "We're here to see Mrs. Grove," I said.

"I'm Mrs. Grove," she said suspiciously. "Who you?" she added harshly, as though to frighten us away.

Just then Dora, the nurse, appeared at her shoulder, and said, "These are the boys I talk about." Dora took the door from Mrs. Grove's hand and opened it wider. "Come," Dora waved. "Come in, come in."

Mrs. Grove's haughty expression followed us inside. She smelled of cinnamon and baby powder, and was crisply dressed in a pressed cotton dress covered by a white apron stained with what appeared to be red paw prints but under closer inspection was the tomato-smudged handprints of a child, the fabrics noisily

rubbing together as the fleshy rolls of her waist shifted as she walked. Nathan, at this point, was certainly surprised by the two women, but not, really, very much amused. We were lead into a large room filled with small chairs and children's toys, and stood awkwardly in front of Mrs. Grove while Dora disappeared. None of us said anything to one another: Mrs. Grove glaring at us, Nathan confused, myself trying to find something, anything, to say. Then Dora reentered and placed Darren in my arms. "A familiar face," Dora said, though I was uncertain whether it was directed at me or to the child. Nathan and Mrs. Grove eyed each other suspiciously and then turned and looked at me rocking Darren. Mrs. Grove seemed to relax a bit, shrugging herself into a resolve. "Well, you boys can help," she said. "It's pasta night."

"*Pasta night*?" Nathan and I answered, incredulously, at the same time.

She gave us another disapproving glance, as if we should have known what we had walked into. "Come on," she said and led us into another room filled with small tables and children's high chairs. "Dora, find them some rags," she said, and disappeared through a swinging door. Around the room there were children, small infants ranging from three months to three years old in the high chairs or in cribs, a roll of toilet tissue unraveling on the floor, a bright orange beach towel draped over the arm of a chair. There were three other women in the room, two black and one Hispanic, all much more younger and slender than our heavyweight host, stooping before babies with forks and spoons and large bowls of pinkish spaghetti and pasta, but each of these ladies looked up at us and smiled or nodded when we entered the room. Nathan slipped his coat off, walked around a Cabbage Patch doll and a foam football on the floor, and took Darren out of my arms and placed him into a chair. Dora handed me a warm washcloth, and Nathan took a bowl of spaghetti Mrs. Grove had reappeared with, and he crouched in front of Darren trying to get him to grasp a fork. Darren was more interested in sticking his fingers into

the spaghetti than putting it into his mouth or even wanting to acknowledge the fork, so Nathan and I sat on the floor, cross-legged, observing politely but still trying to feel involved, till one of the other ladies asked Nathan to watch another child while she went into the kitchen and got more juice.

"Wait," Nathan said, a little too sharply as the woman rose to leave the room. It was loud enough for all of us to hear, sending, at once, a shock through the room. At first, I thought Nathan was scared at being alone with the child.

"What's her name?" Nathan asked the woman, softer, aware of the disturbance he had caused.

"Georgia," she answered.

"Georgia," Nathan repeated and sat down in front of the baby, taking his wash rag and wiping the baby's face into a smile.

❍

When Nathan and I first began living with each other, we defined our relationship with certain boundaries. Monogamy would not be an issue between us, we decided, but discretion would be. If one of us tricked with someone, we would not discuss it with the other. We were also adamant about keeping our identities separate, making sure to define ourselves as individuals, not entirely as a couple. To help us to achieve this, we agreed that we would give each other a night off every week from the relationship. Tuesday nights fell into being our nights to do as we planned, whether going out separately with a friend or out to a bar or just spending time alone. Nathan set the pattern very early on in that he would be the one who would be out of the apartment on Tuesday nights, and which I readily accepted; I always considered Nathan as the more adventurous one of us. The first Tuesday night without Nathan I remember I sat and listened to an album on the stereo, smoked a joint, looked at myself nude in the mirror, then fell asleep in front of the television; such was the extent of entertaining myself.

The next week I was more prepared—Denise and I went out to dinner, then I went home and did laundry. Gradually over the years, Tuesdays came and went and our regimen of individuality fell away or reasserted itself whenever necessary. So it was not a surprise when Nathan mentioned a few days after going to Grove House for the first time—just before he was turning off the lamp beside the bed—that he was going out on Tuesday night. My only concern was how taxing it would be to him; the weather was still chilly, and he was trying to maintain a full work schedule, but I refused to voice my concern, not letting myself seem to nag him or worry him in that manner. I didn't ask what he was doing, that was not the scenario between us; Tuesday nights were always reserved for their privacy as well. "I'm going back to pasta night," he said, which did surprise me. I lifted my eyes to him and gave him a grin, wounded a bit, though, that he had not asked me along, pleased, however, that he had found something to do that could give him some sort of psychological support in regard to his own health.

"Do you think she would let me bring Georgia home?" he asked as I slipped my body around his, ready to fall asleep.

"*Bring Georgia home*?" I replied. Now he had stunned me.

"Just for a weekend, maybe," he said, testing me, to gage my reaction.

"Nathan," I said, a bitterness rising and catching in my throat as I reached across him for the lamp switch. "Don't set yourself up for disappointments."

❍

There is an energy to working with wood, especially older wood, that makes the work become therapeutic. There is the sanding, the staining, the wiping and polishing, the way the wood feels to the touch, the texture one minute silky with dust, another slick with sand, a corner, perhaps, stubbly and rough against the fingertips. Not all of the energy, of course, emanates from the wood or the

work, but from the repetition, the constant touch of the wood, the stroking, the rubbing, the action that brings to it a quality akin to meditation. I can think about a lot of things while working with wood, or nothing at all, transcending a problem, for instance, with a repeated rhythmic motion that soothes, something like what I have seen in people who practice tai chi.

A few weeks before Nathan and I went to Grove House for the first time, I found a pair of highback dining room chairs on the street, the seats kicked out, a support spoke missing from one chair, another broken off midway on the back of the other. I carried the chairs back to the apartment and set them at the end of the hallway, thinking I would be able to repair and refinish them, possibly even give them to Alex to resell. I needed a new project to absorb my attention while at home; my experiments with cooking had waned as Nathan became stronger and began spending more time at the office. And I knew the chairs were over a hundred years old; there is a feeling to aged wood that is different from wood that has been cut today. I think it has something to do with the wisdom the wood achieves with age, the way the fibers soak in time and history as they lose some of their moisture, or at least that's what I would like to believe. The Tuesday night that Nathan went back for a second visit to Grove House I decided to strip the paint off the chairs—someone had painted them a lemon-yellow color that had faded over the years into an industrial discolored beige. That Tuesday night I set newspapers on the floor, found some old rags, and began to wipe away the old paint, sanding the wood in a few hard-to-remove places. I only made it through one chair that night, opening the window and airing out the fumes before Nathan returned. I fell asleep before he came home but felt him when he crawled into the bed beside me.

The next day he mentioned nothing about the chair in the middle of the floor, the sight of which would usually irritate him; he mentioned very little about his visit to Grove House except that he was glad he had gone and Mrs. Grove had let him read a

story to the children before bedtime. He didn't mention whether Dora had been there, nothing was said, either, about the prospects of Georgia's visit; I assumed that Nathan had not yet approached Mrs. Grove about it. I knew, in time, she would either shoot it down or let it happen; such, it seemed, was her nature. But I was surprised when later in the week Nathan mentioned that he would like to go to Grove House on Sunday, and did I want to come along with him? Sunday, it seemed, was "song night."

❍

I took the corner of the sheet and tucked it under the mattress, then watched Dora lean over the bed and flatten out the wrinkles. The room with six cribs was lit only by a small, clown-shaped lamp; the dark blue light of evening filtered through a sheer curtain covering the window. Below us, the rumble of a bass guitar thumped through the plaster seams of the wall. Song night was led by Mrs. Grove's seventeen year-old nephew, Gabriel; in fact, I discovered, that Grove House was staffed almost entirely by Mrs. Grove's relatives; Dora, I learned, was Martha's second cousin. I had followed Dora upstairs when the mood became too surreal for me, watching Gabriel pound out a sing-along to Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" and Nathan join in, playing a tabletop like a drum with two pencils. I would never have guessed that Mrs. Grove's requests would be tunes by Cyndi Lauper and Tina Turner; at one point, during a particularly spirited rendition of "Karma Chameleon," she nodded at me and yelled, "The babies love Boy George the best."

Now I felt a weariness shift into my chest as I stood in the deep light of the window and looked down at the street, taxis and cars floating beneath me as if I were on a bridge. I felt, then, an urge to smoke a cigarette, something I had not done since Nathan and I began living together. It had bothered me to watch Nathan doting on Georgia. It wasn't really that I was jealous; I was worried

that he was becoming attached to someone and something that was unattainable for him—that what he wanted from Georgia, that unconditional love one expects, for instance, from a pet, was not possible from this child. Georgia looked deceptively healthy; earlier this evening, Nathan had held her up by the arms, helping her walk on tiptoe like a precocious ballet dancer on point. Dora had told me that Georgia's mother was a crack addict, which in turn had bequeathed Georgia neurological problems, which were further complicated by too many months in a hospital crib with her feet straight out. If Nathan were to have let go of Georgia's hands, she would have collapsed to the floor like a rag doll. Nathan had mentioned to me last week that Mrs. Grove had showed him how to massage Georgia's legs to help relieve the cramping. And then Dora had made a stray comment as we were changing the bed linens that Darren was likely to be adopted in the next few weeks. Even though I had only seen Darren a few times, had not even bonded with him, I felt so oddly unbalanced by the news, crushed, really, by the weight of my own disappointment, as if I half expected someone to suddenly reveal a plot device and announce the boy as my son.

In the room that night, watching Dora change pillowcases, she said to me, "When I was a girl in Jamaica, I had all the boys chasing me. I know it looks silly—but true. And in the evenings we would go down to the beach and play the music and drink and smoke and dance till we were too tired. Then one day I met a man and I fell in love with him and stayed with him and didn't go to the beach no more, no more swishing the skirt. But he was killed in an accident offshore—he was a fisherman. I was a wailin' and a moanin' girl then, but years made the screaming softer, and one day my sister said, 'Dora, why don't we go down to the beach and go dancing, like old times.' When we got there, there were signs posted KEEP OUT, NO TRESPASSING; the beach was contaminated by an oil spill. You change, life changes you, and then the world changes without you. You will live a long life, Robbie, but things will change

many times for you in many ways."

She wrestled the clean pillowcase onto the pillow, and I felt, then, that this woman knew how my life would turn out. "How is it that you know so much about me?" I asked her.

"Easy," she answered. "You a child of God."

❍

I have often wondered why God spared me instead of others; wondered, too, really, if there is even a God. Is it God that is so judgmental or his Christian followers? Is suffering the punishment of sin or is sin the punishment? Was Georgia being punished because her mother was a crack addict? Was Nathan suffering because he was in love with another man? Was evil the root of the hatred which could sometimes crack my poise as swiftly as a thunderbolt? Religion falters, I believe, when it teaches that gay men should be failures, pariahs, unloved and unlovable outcasts. Society suffers as well by treating these same men as exiles; families disintegrate when their sons become expatriates. But if, to me, AIDS is not a retribution, is there some sort of meaning in the challenge it provides? Is there meaning in suffering or merely meaning from experience? And how, in that experience, do I find the manifestation of God?

What saved me from death or harm, for instance, the day when I was four years old and fell off a swing set? What saved me, years later, as I narrowly missed stepping in front of a Manhattan bus? Why did my mother die at an early age while my father survived to haunt me as an adult? Is there some grand scheme to the way my life unfolds before me, why one day I cook pots of pasta in hopes of saving Nathan, another day I scrape paint off a chair to calm my soul?

Nathan would have said, of course, that I was looking for too much meaning in things. Why, for instance, couldn't I just live in the moment? Nathan was always the one of us who could find

meaning in action, not in forethought, which is why he began going to Grove House every evening now after he got off work. He didn't need to explain this to me; I knew he received as much from the children as they did from his help, knew that by placing himself in the company of terminally ill children, he was also accepting his own mortality.

Time passed, then, without Tuesday nights being officially separated from our lives. I worked each evening on the chairs when I got home, fielded phone calls from friends checking in, sat with Nathan when he arrived home, exhausted, still able to eat, however, a piece of pie or high-calorie milkshake I would urge upon him. Those were the days I felt for hope in everything—within the stillness in the apartment, within the steam heat rising through the pipes, within the sounds of the streets filtering in through the closed windows. But there was nothing I could do to keep the hope suspended before me—it was so fleeting—nothing I could do, either, about the chill seeping through the room, for instance, worrying that if I were so cold here in the apartment, how was Nathan feeling on the sidewalk, rushing from work to Grove House?

Mrs. Grove was adamant about not letting Georgia out of the house overnight. The weather was a problem—winter was stretching out its icy hand to the bitter end. And then there was the equipment that was at Grove House in case of an emergency—the respirator, the IV, the lotions, thermometer, and disinfectants—all things Nathan and I did not possess in our apartment or that we could not arrange to Mrs. Grove's satisfaction. She did agree, however, to allow Nathan to give Georgia a ten-month-old birthday party at our apartment.

The party was more a spontaneous event than a planned celebration; Nathan had only found out Thursday evening that Mrs. Grove would let Georgia visit for a few hours with us on Saturday, and only on the condition that Georgia was not coughing when she woke up that morning and that the weather was not

brutally unmanageable. Nathan's parents were coming down for a visit from Hartford that day, and instead of meeting them for lunch we decided to cook a meal for the party.

The party was, I believe, more festive for the adults than it was for Georgia; how much awareness does a child of ten-months possess, beyond what, perhaps, is immediately thrust before her eyes? Nathan brought crepe paper streamers from the party store on the corner. Mrs. Solloway arrived carrying Mylar balloons, Mr. Solloway reluctantly helping her tie them to the table. I cooked a large pot of pasta, several types of sauces, and made a large bowl of salad. Jerry brought a small chocolate cake, and Martin brought taco chips and dips. We asked our neighbors, Debbie and Andrew—a young couple who lived next door—to stop by; and Abby, Nathan's secretary, stopped in for a few minutes on the way home from seeing a movie. Neither Brian nor Alex showed up; both had made other arrangements earlier in the week. Dora and Mrs. Grove were also conspicuously absent—both had been invited—but Gabriel showed up with a small electric piano which Nathan plugged into our stereo system. Mr. Solloway frowned throughout the party until Jerry convinced Gabriel to stick to old Motown tunes; suddenly, Nathan, Jerry, and Martin started entertaining the party as if they were the Supremes, Mr. Solloway snapping their photos with his camera as if he were a photographer for *Vogue*.

There is something about looking into the face of a child that is more absorbing than any movie or television show. There is something that infects the spirit upon hearing a laugh spill around the room and work its way into your bones. I was surprised to find I had so many moments alone with Georgia that afternoon; surprised too by the need for all of us to feel so festive. Had things been so gloomy for us for such a long period? Alex called during a spirited rendition of "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" to again offer his apologies at not being at the party, and while trying to explain the scenario to him, I noticed the two unfinished chairs in the corner, face-to-face, holding between them the small suitcase

Nathan had brought back when he had picked up Georgia from Grove House. It was then it occurred to me I could make the chairs into a crib, cutting a large panel that would cover and weld both of the seats together, using some newel posts from an old stairway Alex had stored in his studio to make the sidings. Nathan said that if all went well today, Mrs. Grove would allow Georgia a visit once or twice a month; there was even the possibility of her allowing more children to visit. If there is a God, I believe he was with us at that party; if there is a God, at that moment he gave me a plan.

In the cab back to Grove House that afternoon, Nathan held Georgia wrapped between the folds of a pale blue blanket.

"You think this is all so silly, don't you?" he asked me when the cab came to a stoplight near Tenth Avenue. A burst of warm spring-like weather had infused the end of our day with even more optimism.

"Of course not," I answered, my eyes searching out the end of an overhead walkway between two buildings. The sidewalks were empty in this portion of town; the buildings dark and squatty and industrial-looking.

"I wish *I* could give you a child," Nathan said.

"What?"

"You remember," he said as the cab lurched forward. "All those years ago. I used to go to the sperm bank?"

I nodded, smiled a bit too wistfully. "Why did you stop that?"

"I didn't have to do it anymore," he answered. "I didn't have to prove myself, prove I was an adult, or a young man, or a hot property. I just settled into me."

"I wish I could give you a kid," I answered, feeling, all at once, the impossibilities our lives presented us with.

"Maybe someday they'll create a way for two men to have a biological baby. That would be wild, wouldn't it?"

I leaned into him and Georgia as the cab turned up Seventeenth Street and started heading east. "I'm sure you'd be the first one to sign up," I said lightly, placing my hand against his thigh for balance.

"The guinea pig," he laughed. "I'd be the guinea pig for that."

I was wearing a sweatshirt underneath a denim jacket that day, and he used his free hand to lift my sweatshirt up. He moved Georgia over closer to me and pressed her fingers against my stomach.

"This is why," he said, brushing her fingers up through the hair of my chest. "Why it's so important. To touch another life. To have another life touch you." He lifted her away from me, and in that instant I felt abandoned, Godless, fearful of sinking into loneliness without Nathan.

The cab stopped in front of Grove House and I said, "Nathan, you'd make a good father." But he hadn't heard me; he and Georgia were already out the door.

❍

Time is what you fight with AIDS. It robs you of plans and a future. It's a disease of inches, difficult to chart, at times, on a day-to-day basis. Those were the days I realized I knew so little about HIV, the way the virus replicates itself within the body, realized too how little hope the doctors could provide, what a gamble, a crapshoot, medicine was, after all. Why does one antibiotic work for one man and not another? Why does one man develop KS while another struggles with pneumonia? Now, at night, I would awaken after a few hours of sleep, my body tensing because my mind was rested, ready to resume thinking. It was then, deep at night, that I could no longer fight off my hatred. I would get up out of bed, move to the couch or a chair, try to read, but instead, I would be focused, resolutely so, on why this was happening to us. I searched and searched through my memory for someone to blame—Hank? Will? Pat? My exercise was futile, of course; between Nathan and myself there must have been more than two hundred men, and so I would just sit there hating myself, hating my situation, trying with all my conviction not to blame Nathan, not to hate

him for bringing this into our lives—this, this unexpected virus. And so I would find myself rigid with thought even away from the bedroom, and I would roll my neck to unwind the stress, stand and stretch and return to the bed, unable to sleep, though, instead watching Nathan sleep beside me, his face squashed against the pillow or sometimes at my chest, listening to his breathing, the body repairing itself with small strokes of air. Sleep, now, was no longer an escape for me; such was the way anxiety inhabited my world.

AIDS creates fear in surges; for every calming stroke I applied while working on the chairs, another, more distressful one would surface. Every gay man facing AIDS reviews, at some point, the sexual contacts he has had in his lifetime. It's not really to try to pinpoint the source of infection—there is seldom a way of knowing what encounter was the source—and between Nathan and myself we had slept with many, many, many men. I believe this review, this inspection, is to reassure ourselves that the act of sex itself was not the cause of the problem—sex, after all, is what defines and unites gay men, it is their God and their religion, the way they dress and talk and sing and move down the street, the way they meet their friends and lovers, the way too they define their community. What was at fault was a virus, a *retrovirus*, no one could have predicted. A virus that could possibly be transmitted between two men during a sexual act. How had an act that could bring both life and pleasure suddenly become darkened by illness and death? The act of sex, I felt, no, I decided, finally, was not at fault. What had to be accepted, what I had to remind myself over and over, was that sex between two men does not cause them to die. There were ways now to prevent the transmission of the virus; hadn't Nathan and I been practicing safe sex for years?

I finished building the crib in less than two weeks; the newel posts had turned out to be too large for the sides, so I had created a railing from some doweling I found in Alex's studio. I borrowed a drawknife to create the curves and slopes of the headboard and

baseboard. By the time I began staining the wood, spring had arrived and I could open the windows as I applied the varnish, a sweet, warm breeze blowing the fumes around the apartment like incense. Nathan brought Georgia back for two more visits to the apartment; the second one she spent in the crib, her fingers clutching for the Mylar balloon we had kept since her first visit and that now floated above her, tied to one of the sides of the crib. With the crib done, Nathan's health maintaining a sort of status quo, I was able to feel more relaxed in the evenings. Alex had sent me to a job at a midtown construction site where I was helping with drywalling, and in the evenings I would arrive home smelly and dusty, but I would go into the kitchen and chop vegetables before showering. The ritual had attained an invigorating rhythm; after showering I would experiment with sautéing the vegetables in a wok.

And then one night Nathan was in the kitchen cooking when I got home. I was surprised to see him home, surprised to find him hunched over a bowl of boiled potatoes that he was mashing with a fork.

"I needed a night off," he said before I had a chance of asking him what was going on. "You want broccoli or beans?" he asked.

"Broccoli," I answered, and went into the bedroom, flipped on the stereo, and began to undress. My routine had been disrupted, but before I stepped into the shower I felt something was wrong; Nathan was trying too easily to push me away, without a fight, which meant he wanted me to nag him, force him to tell me what was wrong. I slipped a towel around my waist and went back into the kitchen.

"Did you see the doctor today?" I asked.

"Nothing's wrong," he answered abruptly.

I turned and noticed that there were candles placed at the center of the table; Nathan had also bought fresh flowers, irises for the vase on the bookshelf. I knew, then, something was *very* wrong.

I looked at him sternly, unwilling to budge, willingly embarrassing him there with my flesh, my exhaustion, my body screaming for him to open up and tell me what was wrong.

"I think I'm going to leave the firm," he said. "I'll be able to keep my insurance going; that's not a problem. I'll sell some of my prints." He nodded to the animated artwork on the walls of our apartment which he had collected over the years. "The cash will help us float for a while."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "I've spoken to Mrs. Grove about it. She's offered me a full-time position at Grove House."

"*Grove House*?" I answered, a bit too surprised. All at once I felt jealous of Mrs. Grove, jealous of Georgia and Dora and Gabriel and all of the things that were pulling Nathan away from me. "I need to do it," he said.

"Do you *want* to do it?" I asked.

"Yeah," he answered, turning away from me and opening the freezer door. I left the kitchen and went into the bathroom, trying to relax the stiffening muscles of my shoulders under the warm water.

I felt better after I had dried myself, dressed in clean clothes, and combed my hair, as if I had washed away a forgotten self. When I went back into the kitchen, I was surprised to find Nathan seated with his head resting on the edge of the table, crying.

"Georgia died this morning," he said, briefly looking up at me, and then buried his face back into his hands.

❍

If there is a God, why does he abandon you when you need him the most? If there is a God, why does he take from you the things that give you hope? When a person is diagnosed with AIDS, more than one life is affected; change reverberates through lovers and families and friends, out into society and politics and the fabric

of the world. Though I was not ill myself, the anxiety of Nathan's illness produced as much damage to me as the virus was one day planning for him. Though Georgia's death did not touch me the way it touched Nathan, it touched me nonetheless. How does faith survive when it is constantly tested by disappointment? How does hope survive when constantly facing death?

The following day I could not get out of bed to go to work. Nathan had left the apartment, and I could not even find the energy to get up to eat. I fell into a feverish dream, and when I awoke it was late afternoon. From the bed I could see the crib I had made sitting in the darkened corner of the hallway, and then I remembered the day my mother died, how she had lifted herself from her bed and cooked me a hamburger. I was stunned to see her standing that day—she was frail and thin; the chemotherapy had sapped her to nothing. "We survive by doing things," she said, and sat at the table and watched me eat. Then she went back to her bedroom and died. That memory lifted me out of my bed that afternoon, and I dressed and went out of the apartment, down the steps, and into the streets of Manhattan. It was already rush hour, and even in this part of the Village I could sense the purposeful walk of those whose jobs were over and were on their way home. There was, then, an agitation to the traffic—taxis blaring their horns, cars cutting pedestrians off at crosswalks, messengers on bikes weaving on and off of the sidewalk. As I headed uptown I found, however, a rhythm in my steps, found myself, oddly, repeating the lyrics of "Addicted to Love," again and again in my mind until I was actually singing while walking.

Later, when Mrs. Grove answered the door, she wasn't startled to see me; she welcomed me graciously as if an old friend, so differently, I was aware, from how we had greeted each other at our first meeting. Dora was in the hallway, working her way up the stairs, and she smiled softly down to me and pointed me into the direction of the kitchen, as if she knew all along I had been on my way here. It was Tuesday, and Nathan was in the kitchen

pulling down the boxes of food he would be using for pasta night. I could tell right away he was surprised to see me, thinking, I know, that something was wildly wrong with me, or that, perhaps, I had arrived, now, with my own set of bad news.

"Hi," I said casually, picking up a box of pasta from the counter, calmly glancing at the directions that were printed on the side panel. "I'm here." I looked over at him. "Let me help cook."

Jade

The plane dropped through a pocket of air like a kite in search of wind. Mae, unnerved, looked up from her compact mirror in the direction of the stewardess, but the perky young woman showed no sign of alarm. The plane dropped again and Mae cursed under her breath. The stewardess walked down the aisle, smiling, whispering, "Please fasten your seat belts. The plane is landing."

Every winter Mae flew nonstop from New York to Florida. Since her grandson Seth's funeral, however, Mae had decided a stopover was necessary this year. Seth's illness had revealed a shroud her grandson kept over his life from his family. All at once Mae had learned in a phone call that Seth was in the hospital, dying, and his lover, Ty, was already dead. A year ago Mae had not even known her grandson was gay.

Mae let the cabin empty before she moved from her seat. She stood and discreetly adjusted her bra beneath the sleeveless knit blouse she wore, then buttoned the old cream-colored sweater at the neck, draping it across her shoulders like a cape. The stewardess approached and handed Mae the cane that had been stored in an overhead compartment. Mae ran her palm over the polished crook of the cane, then lifted her purse and shopping bag from the floor.

"Someone should say something to your friend that maybe he should go back for some flying lessons. No wind. No storm. And still they try to terrorize old women into heart attacks while

landing a plane."

"I'm sorry ma'am," the stewardess said. "We hit some minor turbulence. Nothing serious. I hope the rest of your flight was peaceful."

"Peaceful?" Mae asked, shocked at the girl's use of the word. "What's so peaceful about the lady next to me jumping up every time a man without a wedding band headed in the direction of the restroom?"

Mae stopped herself. She was doing it again. That cranky, whining old-woman routine. "I'm sorry, dear," she said to the stewardess. "Still crabby from the nap." Mae laughed deeply, from the bottom of her chest, till it leapt into a girlish cackle.

The stewardess smiled, then said mechanically, "Hope you enjoyed the flight. Bye-bye."

When the ramp descended into the terminal, Mae recognized Ty's daughter, Janna, from the photo she had seen in Seth's apartment. Janna was a handsome, thirtyish black woman, big-boned with skin the color of milk chocolate. Mae knew instantly it was going to be a tough meeting from the frown on Janna's face.

Mae approached and introduced herself. "Mae Steinberg," she said.

Janna forced a smile; her lips tightened over the expanse of teeth. "I'm Janna," she said. "How was your flight?"

"That pilot, such a *shmendrik*," Mae rolled her eyes. "Couldn't fly a toy airplane. And every time I dozed off one of those *farkakte* girls was hovering over me with a drink. Can't they let you be? Why do they all think they have to entertain like MGM?" Mae caught herself again with a deep breath and changed gears. "You're so pretty. Just like I imagined. And such lovely green eyes."

Janna forced another smile.

Actually Mae had been unprepared for Janna's beauty; was startled, in fact, by the striking angles of her face and the vivid color of her eyes. Mae tried to remember if Seth had ever talked of Janna, but nothing about her came immediately to mind.

"Such a lovely dress you're wearing," Mae said.

"Would you like to get a bite to eat?" Janna asked.

Mae noticed the woman's tone was cold and businesslike.

"Oh no. Just a drink," Mae said.

"There's a place just at the corner there." Janna pointed.

Mae waved her cane in the air and smiled. "It's more for effect," she said. "It's so everyone will know I'm a crotchety old woman."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not so." Janna laughed, revealing at last a nice, normal smile.

"But it is," Mae said. "I *am* a cranky old woman. I *like* being a cranky old woman. Sometimes," she added, and winked at Janna.

Janna headed toward a table in the back, away from the concourse, but Mae stopped her by tugging on her sleeve. "Dear, let's sit at the bar," she said. "Be daring."

They took seats at the lip of the bar. Mae lifted herself to perch on a stool.

"There's never any air in these places," Mae said. "*Mechaieh*. Just that fake chill." Mae could feel herself breathing heavily. She wondered if it was from their brisk walk to the bar, her nervousness, or perhaps, even, simply from her old age.

A waitress approached the two women and placed napkins in front of them.

"I'll have a ginger ale," Janna said.

"Ginger ale?" Mae asked, alarmed. "What do you have? An ulcer?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. Just a sour stomach," Janna explained.

Just the stomach? Mae thought to herself, then wondered if her presence made Janna miserable, a recognition of her father's other life or a reminder of his absence. Mae flipped her hand in the air to distract the waitress. "Beer," Mae said. "Something low-cal."

The waitress turned and disappeared. Janna's attention was diverted to the opposite end of the concourse, where a row of servicemen in khaki uniforms leaned in various positions against the wall.

"They look so relaxed," Janna said. "Just like everyone else. But they're all dressed up like toys."

"Toys?" Mae wondered out loud and stared at the servicemen. "Really? Do they belong to us?"

"What?" Janna asked.

"American?" Mae asked.

"Yes," Janna answered. "There's a base just south of the city."

The waitress returned with their drinks and set them on the napkins. She took a sponge and began wiping the bar next to Janna.

Mae stared at a mirror hanging over the bar, above the waitress's head. "What have they written on it?" she asked Janna, and pointed into the air, the bracelets on her wrist falling down her arm with a series of tiny clinks and clanks. "There."

Janna looked up at the mirror. "It's a type of peach liqueur."

"Really?" Mae glanced at the mirror again, trying to focus the words, then called to the waitress, "Miss! Miss!" The waitress placed her sponge down.

"Could I try one of those?" Mae pointed to the sky, her bracelets again clanking and clinking.

The waitress looked up, then at Mae. "Straight up?"

"What?" Mae asked.

"Straight or on the rocks?" the waitress asked again.

"A little ice would be nice, thank you," Mae answered.

The waitress disappeared and returned with a small glass filled with a golden liquid. She placed it in front of Mae. Mae thought the shivers of ice in the glass made the drink seem to sparkle.

"Bitter," Mae said, pursing her lips, when she had tasted the liqueur. "Want a taste?" she asked Janna.

"No thanks," Janna answered.

"Let me show you my great-grandson," Mae said, and reached for her purse. She pulled her eyeglasses from the chain on her neck and placed them on her face. From her purse she pulled out a yellow envelope twisted with rubber bands. She unraveled the

envelope and began showing pictures to Janna.

"That's my daughter, Judy, and her husband, Mack, in front of their house in Fairfield. Seth's parents," she said. "And that's Seth's brother, Noah, and his wife when I went out to their house on Long Island. Here we go. That's Josh. Eight days old. Just before the bris. Isn't he perfect?"

"He's beautiful," Janna said, leaning into Mae.

"Children are always beautiful," Mae said. "No matter how old they get to be."

Mae wrapped the photographs back up in the envelope. "And you? Don't you have a little girl?" Mae asked.

Janna, looking embarrassed at the sudden switch of attention toward herself, answered, "Yes. Daycee. She's four now."

"Such a wonderful age, you know. They're so bright and still learning. Is she in kindergarten?"

"Preschool." Janna smiled. Mae thought that at last Janna seemed to be warming up.

"She must keep you busy."

"Oh yes," Janna said with a heavy laugh. "Last night she wouldn't go to sleep until I read her 'The Princess and the Pea.' For the seventh time that day. And then she made me take her bed apart and show her there was nothing hidden under her mattress."

"She sounds so adorable," Mae said, smiling, fingering the gold chain at her neck. "And your husband? He's still a salesman for computers?"

Mae could tell by Janna's frown that she had gone too far, stepped over a line, remembered too much personal information.

"Yes, yes," Janna answered tersely. "He just got a new store. We thought he might be transferred, but we made it through all the cutbacks."

Mae looked up at the mirror above the bar, wondering if it was blurry because her eyesight was so bad or because of the drinks. She lifted her glasses to her eyes and squinted till everything came into focus.

"You didn't need to come all this way," Janna said.

"Come where?" Mae asked, and waved her hand. "I'm on my way to Miami. Too much time in the air and God might send me to heaven before I land. A stopover's good. A break in the journey."

Janna looked down at her drink, having nothing else to say.

"Besides, I thought we should meet. Your mother. My daughter. All those phone calls. And now, because Ty and Seth are both dead, they think nobody has to talk anymore. *Shanda*." Mae could feel that cranky edge rising within her. She pulled herself back and continued. "And we found this when cleaning Seth's apartment. You should have it."

Mae handed Janna the small shopping bag. Janna reached her hand into the bag and pulled out a thick but little black leather-bound book. Janna rubbed the cover with her hand, finding the crease of the jacket where it had been bent over the edge of the pages for so many years.

"My father's Bible," Janna said. "I haven't seen this since..." Her voice trailed off.

Mae watched the astonishment erase the tension from Janna's expression as she pressed her hand against the cover of the Bible. Janna flipped through the pages, stopping at a page where her ancestors had recorded their births and weddings and deaths.

"So old." Mae lifted her head at Janna. "It must be worth a fortune."

Janna continued staring at the Bible.

"Your father. He was a real *mensch*," Mae said.

"What?" Janna asked.

"Salt of the earth," Mae explained.

"You never met him, did you?" Janna said.

"What?"

"My father."

"No," Mae said. "He and Seth were very private. They kept it a secret from us. Till he died and then Seth told us."

Mae watched Janna for some sort of emotional response, but her face had returned to its austere, restrained composure.

"When he was in the hospital Seth told me some wonderful stories about him," Mae said. "Such a smart man. A good man. He must have been, to have loved my grandson."

"He never believed in God, you know," Janna said.

"What?" Mae asked. "God?" She felt suddenly abandoned, lost. She caught her breath. "But he believed in so many other things," Mae said. "In freedom. In trust. In love. It was as if he *had* to believe in God."

Janna lifted her eyes to meet Mae's. She smiled thinly, hiding her teeth.

"I never meant to seem that I disapproved of them," Janna said. "You just don't think things like that about your father."

"Now, now, dear," Mae said. "I know he must have loved you very much." Mae took her hand and placed it on top of Janna's.

"Those are lovely bracelets," Janna said, touching the bracelets Mae wore on her wrist. Mae knew Janna was trying again to deflect the attention away from herself.

"Jade," Mae answered, and noticed they were the same color as Janna's eyes. "They belonged to my sister." By instinct Mae rubbed her other hand across the smooth stone surfaces and twisted her wrist in the air so that the bracelets slid down her arm, catching the overhead light.

Mae looked at the bracelets, then at Janna's eyes, noticing how oddly Janna's concentration focused, sharpened, and changed. Mae looked again at the bracelets and knew Janna had noticed not the color of the stones, nor the play of light, but instead the small list of numbers tattooed below Mae's wrist.

Janna looked away from Mae, at her drinks, then at the mirror above the bar.

"I must find that gate now," Mae said. "Miss! Miss!" Mae yelled. "Can we have a check? Why do they always disappear just when you need them?"

The waitress returned and Mae paid for the check, over Janna's objections, and Janna walked Mae to a gate at the other end of the concourse.

"I met your grandson once in New York," Janna said as they reached the gate. "I was about three months pregnant, and we had dinner together with my father. Seth didn't know I knew about him and my dad. I hated every minute of that dinner. I was so insulted that my father would put us at the same table. And then, when the check came, Seth and my dad started fighting over the bill. Seth insisted he pay for his dinner, but my father wouldn't let him. They didn't speak to each other the rest of the night."

Janna looked around at the assembling crowd of passengers, then back at Mae. "I was still so young then," she said, bowing her head toward the floor as if praying. "I didn't understand a lot of things. But I could tell by their silence that night that they cared very much for each other."

Mae, surprised by Janna's remembrance, watched Janna slowly move the hand that carried her father's Bible and place it against her breast.

"I'm sorry," Janna said, as the stewardess announced that Mae's flight was to begin boarding.

"You're sorry. I'm sorry," Mae shook her head. "These are personal sorries. Should Mr. President fall sick with this *mishegoss*, then the doctors will finally be sorry. That's what the world's come to."

"No. I mean— " Janna started, confused.

"I know," Mae said. "I know."

Mae felt self-conscious and displaced in the awkward silence that followed, till Janna leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"I'm glad I came to meet you," Janna said, walking with Mae toward the ramp.

"Me? A cranky old woman with too much jewelry?" Mae answered, and shrugged her shoulders. "I must thank *you*," she said, "for letting me know my grandson was happy."

Janna frowned again but thawed as Mae patted her on the shoulder and said goodbye. Mae turned and headed up the ramp, rattling her bracelets in the air with a wave before she disappeared out of Janna's sight.

Once again in the air, Mae complained to the stewardess about the food and the pillow and the crying baby behind her. Before the plane landed, the pilot veered the plane into a wide arc. Below, Mae studied the Florida coast. What a lovely shade of green, she thought, noticing the color of the sea where it turned shallow just before land.

Who The Boys Are

The dream begins at the beach. I am lying on a towel, my face toward the sun. It is hot. I am sweating. Near me, my friends Jeff and Ricky are throwing a Frisbee to each other, though they have never met. My dog, Zero, dead since childhood, chases the waves. The water breaks in white curls, sounding suspiciously like bubbles in an aquarium. The sky, at first blue, is suddenly filled with gray clouds that swirl together like a hurricane. There is a flash of light and I open my eyes. The dream is over. The light above my bed is on. I can feel the white cotton gown sticking to my skin. The respirator above the bed gurgles. My father sits at the foot of the bed in a chair, reading a magazine. He notices I am awake. "Some boys were here to see you," he says. "They said they'd be back. Went to get something to eat." I close my eyes and fall asleep again.

❍

I am awake when Stuart and Vince enter the room. Though I have not been outside in what seems to be months, I know it must be raining. Stuart is wearing a tan raincoat. Vince carries a folding umbrella. They both lean over the bed, one at a time, and kiss me lightly on the cheek, saying "Hello," "How are you?" The chairs scrape across the floor as they are rearranged so Stuart and Vince can sit next to the bed. Stuart places his hand on top of mine.

I don't listen at first. I just stare. Their dark hair, brown eyes, lean bodies the same height, so similar they appear to be brothers. But different: Stuart's complexion lighter, his forehead broader; Vince's stubble of unshaven beard, hair peeking above the collar of his sweater. Stuart slumps forward in the chair as he talks. When I listen he is describing the house they are buying in Pennsylvania, built in the nineteenth century and once the general store for a town with a population not much larger than this room's. "The house is huge," he says. "Four bedrooms, two fireplaces, an attic, a cellar, a separate garage, which we think we might turn into a studio or guest cottage." Vince, usually the quietest of us when we are together, today fills the awkward pauses politely, offering explanations directed to my father: "Near Scranton," "Three and a half hours," "Weekends."

Sometimes I worry Vince thinks I hate him. We started off awkward. I, confused, jealous, that Stuart had a lover. He, confused, jealous, that I knew Stuart better than he. I have known Stuart since college, freshman year, when we met while taking art history. We shared an apartment off-campus for two years, discovered each other's preference for men during late-night study breaks, explored the bars downtown, teased each other about the young men we brought home, and spent a summer together in London. We moved to Manhattan, where we lived in an apartment in the West Village: he to attend graduate school, I to start a job, each of us a friend to the other, both looking to find a lover.

My father tells Vince about a system which purifies well water. My father was always repairing, rebuilding our house outside Atlanta. Two years ago, he sold the house, and now lives in Florida.

A nurse enters and the chairs scrape across the floor again. She takes my temperature, pulse, and blood pressure and writes on the chart. I don't like this nurse, Thelma; she never has anything nice to say. Today she says, "Nothing new," before she leaves. I look down at my left arm, where she has left it on the bed. I hardly

recognize it. The dark hair has turned light, the skin is blotched red and gray, there are circles of blue bruises bigger than the lesions on my thigh. If I even think about moving my arm it hurts; I am amazed that something so thin can feel so heavy, almost as heavy as the white gown which presses so hard against my chest I think it must be trying to stop my breath. Suddenly I want nothing more than to go back to sleep.

❍

Alec brings flowers and messages from work: Reyna, our secretary, picked out the tulips, Don says hello and plans to visit, Fred, the security guard, is getting married in the summer, and Martin, our boss, wants to know what I think about a Friday-night horror series. Each comment is expelled rapidly in his thin, breathless voice before his coat is off. Though I remember telling everyone to stop bringing me things, Alec always arrives with something. He pulls an enamel pin, shaped and painted in the design of a fifties television set, from his coat pocket, flashes it in front of me like his smile, and pins it to my gown.

He looks so healthy and winsome, dressed in a blue shirt, a red sweater vest, and gray pleated pants. He introduces himself to my father and shakes his hand firmly. His smooth, round face, and light freckles make him look so innocent and boyish. For years he tried to look older, so people would take him seriously. He grew a moustache that made his upper lip seem too wide, and then a beard that sprouted only in patches. He tried wearing dark, tailored clothes to look more professional, and thick black plastic eyeglasses to look studious. Now they are gone and the contacts he wears brighten the color of his amber eyes. Now he looks comfortable, relaxed, youthful. At the television network where we work everyone, after seven years, is aware his intelligence and opinions are invaluable. He can zip off how many episodes of an old TV series were shot, naming the directors, stars, and supporting

cast without checking the reference files; he can read the script of a series pilot and tell why it won't work but how it can be made better. Once he saved my neck when he vetoed a suggestion for a comedy special televised live from a nightclub; though I thought it would work, he remembered another network had tried it and failed.

When I was admitted this time I refused to allow anyone to turn on the TV beside the bed. I didn't want to be reminded that I was missing work. And I didn't need the distraction; my roommate, a young man with a hacking cough, kept his set on all day, all night, the sound spilling above, below, and around the heavy plastic partition which separated us. I was relieved when he left and the doctor decided to keep his bed empty.

Alec sits on the edge of the bed and slips an arm beneath my body. Swiftly, deftly, he lifts my head and shoulders and flips over my pillows, something he knows makes me happy, since I asked him to do it the last time I was in the hospital.

I have always had a crush on Alec. Thanksgiving, the first year we met, we were walking together down Seventh Avenue after dinner. Alec had just broken up with his first lover and moved into an apartment in Chelsea. The sidewalk was slick from a rain which had just stopped, and everything about the city seemed suspended, briefly, in order to catch a breath. But Alec went on and on, his voice nasal from a cold, about what a rat his old boyfriend was. As we turned down his block, I caught the smell of wet pine from the trees roped together and leaning against the wall of a building, waiting to be sold for Christmas. It made me feel so special and yet lonely. His apartment, a railroad flat, was decorated as mine had been in those days: cardboard boxes disguised with sheets, painted wood fruit crates, and threadbare chairs. We sat on his sofa drinking martinis, a new taste we had both acquired, and as I was trying to comfort him about his lover, we started to kiss. We rolled off the sofa, landed on the floor with a thump, and laughed.

"Are we this crazy?" he asked.

"Desperate, you mean," I replied.

"It'll be okay," he says now, while straightening the sheets of the bed, just as he had reassured me of my job when I was troubled by insecurities, just as I had remarked when he was disappointed about his broken relationship.

A doctor enters the room. My father stands up from his chair and the doctor places his hand on my father's shoulder. Alec leads my father out of the room. The doctor doesn't even read my chart. He presses his hands against my neck, underneath my arms, around my wrists, as though examining for broken bones. I don't like this doctor. I don't even know his name. He tells me he wants to take more blood. What can I do? More tests, more results, never any answers.

❍

Another dream: I am swimming in the dark. A pool or maybe a lake. The water is thick and heavy but it feels good to be moving. My breathing is short and troubled but when I dive underneath and hold my breath it feels like I'm flying.

A white line separates the darkness. As it brightens I see a road speeding beneath me, a tunnel of trees on either side. When the road disappears I continue flying: over a lake, a field of wild flowers, then another road, and then a mountain. I stop when I reach a crowd of faces. The only one I recognize is my mother. As I touch her white hair it is bright again.

Awake, I am hungry, as though all my exercise, my dreaming, has created an appetite. I haven't had any real food in weeks. Nutrition, a clear liquid, is pumped from a plastic bag through a tube connected to my vein.

My father stares at the view from the window, twelve floors above the East River. I have never seen this view; the blinds were closed when I arrived, and from where I lie I can only imagine

what he sees: the slow barges on the water, the glint of light on cars crossing the bridge, and the hollow windows of the subway train floating beneath, planes bisecting the horizon, a tipsy helicopter paused beside a building like a hummingbird before a flower. A view of motion, paths crossing, nothing connecting; if it does, it's an accident or a disaster. I wish I could tell my father about my dream, that I saw my mother, but there is a raspy scratch at the back of my throat reminding me I cannot speak.

❍

Jeff is here. He is late, he says, because he ran into my super and explained the faucet in the bathroom needed fixing. Jeff is the one who has taken care of me these last few months, though he was my best friend long before I got sick. He takes me to doctors, cleans my apartment, checks my messages and mail, and waters the plants, so I don't have to worry. I worry anyway. I worry about the bills and the insurance and that this feeling of helplessness will never end. Last month, when I didn't have enough to pay the rent, Jeff called a list of my friends and asked each for money to contribute toward my rent. Now I worry he will leave me, decide he's had enough of all this. The first time I was in the hospital he was always asking about my food and medicine. Had I eaten? Did I want anything special? What pill is that? How often do I need it? Once he yelled at me when a nurse brought me medication and when she left the room I dumped it into the trash. "It hurts my stomach," I said. "But maybe there's something else you can try," he answered.

Jeff is the one who decorated my hospital room with tinsel and a tiny artificial Christmas tree, the green branches covered with silver ornaments and pale-blue lights. He taped the Christmas cards to the wall and arranged a small party for me on Christmas Eve with presents and friends. Jeff is also the one who called my father. On Christmas Day, which I don't even remember, he told

my father I was sick. He explained everything to him, as he told me later, in a calm but precise manner. The next day my father was here, at the hospital, and I know Jeff was relieved not to have to make that other call, the one which would have begun, "Oh, you didn't know?"

Jeff brings the chair close to the bed and spreads the mail, which he has pulled from a plastic bag, across the white sheet. He holds each piece in front of me and says, "Bill," "Letter," or "Garbage," and sorts them into piles. He does this, I know, to show me my life still goes on, though I have given him the power to end it if it gets any worse. He reads me the letters out loud. Today there are two and a postcard. The postcard, a photo of giant ruby slippers beneath a palm tree, is from Clark, a friend who works at the video store on my block, who went to Hawaii for a vacation. One letter is actually a late Christmas card from Jackson, the mail boy at work, saying he is thinking of me. The other is from Ricky, and as Jeff reads it I notice my father lean forward in his chair. My father always liked Ricky. In the summers he used to take us to the Okefenokee to canoe and spot alligators, something Ricky still does. I want to tell Jeff to stop reading, I already know about Ricky's life: his blonde wife, his two kids, his job as an economist for a bank. When he finishes reading it he hands it to my father, and then scoops up the mail and returns it to the plastic bag.

Jeff is the one I will miss most. I think this is hardest on him: my life interrupting his. He met my father at the airport, won't let him lift a finger while he stays at my apartment, takes him out to dinner. Before my father arrived Jeff told me he took the magazines and videos I had on the top shelf of my closet over to his apartment. I feel so dishonest; I've nothing to give him, not even a voice to say thanks.

Jeff has always reminded me of summer, of chlorinated water, of white beaches and beautiful boys. In a way, he is an extension of the Ricky I knew as a kid, perhaps the reason I was first attracted to him. Unclothed, he has a swimmer's body. We met doing laps

in the pool at the Y. His handsomeness immediately awed me: with his broad shoulders, thin waist, high cheekbones, and square jaw, stepping like someone I admired in a book or a magazine off the page and into my life. He works as a catalogue designer, and though he can afford to dress like the high-paid models he selects for photographs, he is usually simply dressed in a plain-colored shirt, old jeans, and sneakers.

Now I can hear Jeff running the water at the sink. Soon he is washing me with a warm cloth. He is not afraid to touch me, like some of the nurses. My father watches Jeff's every stroke; I'm surprised he's not embarrassed at the affection between two boys. Though I can't smell my filth, my stench, because of the respirator, I can feel it on every pore of my body. My hair is matted; I want to shower, shave. But the cloth feels nice, and Jeff quickly dries me with a clean towel after he has washed a portion of my skin, afraid I will become chilled. When he finishes he combs my hair lightly with the brush I keep in the drawer beside the bed.

"Better?" he says, and though I cannot answer, I know he is, too. All this action, movement, is calming for him. If he stopped for a moment he would become depressed, worried, scared. I know him. Now he begins to convince my father he should get something to eat. My father looks at me and then at Jeff, but Jeff is already at the door, waiting. "Rest," Jeff says to me, and then, to my father, "He can use the rest. You can use the food."

❍

It must be hot in the room. Trey removed his jacket after only a few minutes, then his tie, then unbuttoned his shirt and rolled up the sleeves. The first time he visited me I could see the anxiety etched across his face: he was worried he could end up in this room; the predictions say he might.

Shivering, I feel another fever taking hold. My body doesn't seem able to shake the pneumonia this time. It's odd to be so cold

in a room so hot and dry. Trey does not talk, he simply takes my hand and entwines our fingers together. I can still see him the night we met at Alec's party. It was April, two years ago, and the windows were open, a breeze gently flipping the flames of a row of burning candles on a bookshelf. We were both holding drinks. There was something mysterious about him. Perhaps it was his dark, well-trimmed beard. Or the black eyes, or the flat eyebrows which ran into each other at the bridge of his nose. We talked so long our glasses left wet circles on the coffee table.

We were lovers after that first night. Every day I discovered something new about him: the grandson of Rumanian immigrants, a stint teaching English in Portugal, a passion for cinnamon pancakes. When he left I wasn't surprised; after a year together he was still a mystery to me. He was so private and secretive I had not met any of his friends. He said I monopolized the relationship: we ate at restaurants I chose, went to movies I wanted to see, stayed at my apartment instead of his. I was inflexible and he was a puzzle.

The night I was diagnosed I called and left a message on his answering machine. "Murderer," I said, and hung up. I don't know why I did it; I don't blame him. There were others. Maybe I wanted to jolt something so the pieces would fall together. Maybe I wanted to hurt him the way he had hurt me when he left.

Now Trey's eyes are glassy. Any minute I think he may cry. But he seems fine when my father and Jeff walk into the room. Jeff and Trey hug each other, and then Jeff introduces Trey to my father. They shake hands and there is an awkward, silent pause. If I could talk I would yell at them, "Go home. There's nothing else you can do."

❍

My father reads a magazine, stares out the window, watches and listens to the boys come and go. Minutes go by that are as long as days. The days pass, blurring into one another. I know he must

be full of questions: How did this happen? Why to my son? Such fine-looking young men, why aren't they married?

My mother said I had his looks at an early age: his wavy hair, the dimple in his chin, his wide brow, his straight lips, his hazel eyes, his aquiline nose. I know my father must be shocked to see his son, barely over thirty, looking older than himself. My sunken eyes, my mottled skin, what hair I have left from chemotherapy now white.

His parents, my grandparents, are dead. My mother died of cancer three years ago. He had only one son, only one child. All the blood he has left lies in this bed. I want to tell him so much before I fall asleep again, before the dreams do not disappear. I love you and please don't hate me. . . . I love you and please understand that I didn't tell you because I thought you might be angry or disappointed in me. . . . I love you and I don't want to die. . . . I love you and I always wanted to explain my life but I was afraid it would hurt you. . . . I love you and I want to tell you who these boys are. A moment before sleep I feel sure he must understand. I am his only son, his only child. I am him. And these boys are me. . . .

Civil Disobedience

I was fifteen that summer, the summer every time you walked outside it was so hot and muggy it seemed the air was boiling. July was particularly oppressive that year; even the gulf breezes felt like you were brushing up too close to fire. I hung around Kip a lot that summer. We were both marking time; in August he was headed north to be an intern at a Memphis law firm for a month, and I was going to stay at a music conservatory just outside of Nashville till school started up again in the fall. Kip was already sixteen and had his driver's license, and his mother's car was air-conditioned, so we spent a lot of time cruising the street or hanging out at the mall. But most days Kip would get some sort of bug in his craw, he was always real intense, and he would huff and puff till he found some way to feel that his problem had been resolved, clarified, or vindicated. One day, a real scorcher, it was just after noon, and we had been lifting weights in the basement of Kip's house when Kip got into one of his fits and we jumped in the car and drove out to the mall.

"What kind?" I whispered to Kip when we were in the store, waiting for the pharmacist to turn his back to us.

"Any," Kip answered.

I reached up to a row of red-packaged condoms and plucked a box off the bracket, first holding it in my fist and then shoving it into the back pocket of my jeans.

"Let's go," Kip said and pushed me toward the doorway back into the mall.

"You want to put that back?" a voice sounded, and a hand clamped on my shoulder.

I looked up and saw a cop, the mall cop, standing beside us.

I let out a silly, high-pitched laugh. "I don't have anythin'," I said.

"You put it back and I'll let you walk out of here without any problem," the cop said. "Or walk up to the counter and pay for it."

Kip, angry, turned on the cop. "For almost ten years the government has refused to recognize a medical crisis that has spiraled to epidemic proportions. Our action is a political statement to support the movement for the national educational necessity for teaching safe sex in all classrooms."

The cop, ignoring Kip, said to me, "Put 'em back, kid, or I'm gonna take you in the back and show you how they're used."

Kip's eyes widened.

"That's sexual harassment," Kip yelled at the cop. "We could get you dismissed for that, pig."

"Put them back," the cop said firmly. The cop was not much older than we were. Kip once told me he had heard that the cop, Howie, got the job at the mall after he dropped out of high school.

"Now," Howie said, louder.

I reached into my pocket and slid the package back onto the bracket, embarrassed by the scrutiny of Mrs. Nichols and Mrs. Lenahan, next to us, looking at laxatives.

"Ahhh," Kip sighed, disgusted. "To remain inactive on the AIDS crisis is to be an accomplice to death."

"Kip," the policeman said, "get out or I'm gonna call your mother."

"I'm not scared of her," Kip yelled. "I'm scared that we're bein' killed by government neglect."

"Kip," the policeman said. "Don't make me bring other people into this."

"Then arrest me," he said, and forced his wrists in front of the policeman's face. "I want to go to jail. I want to make a statement."

"Get him out of here," the cop said to me.

"Come on," I said to Kip. "Let's go."

"You're always backin' down," Kip yelled at me as we left the store. "Just when we're so close. We wanted to get arrested!"

"You wanted to," I said. "I don't need a record."

"Why does it have to take a congressional hearin' to find out the whole medical profession is understaffed?" Kip said. "There's no goddamn leadership and the President couldn't care less."

We walked to the other end of the mall, or, rather, I walked and Kip stomped, and we sat on the wall in front of the courtyard fountain. Kip pulled a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his T-shirt.

He flipped one out for each of us, then lit them with the lighter he kept on a chain around his neck.

"They won't even arrest us for smokin' in the mall," Kip said.

"It's against the law," I said, practicing a smoke ring. "But everyone does it."

We sat there silent, blowing smoke rings up into the skylight.

"Put it out," Kip said suddenly.

"Why?"

"My brother is lookin' at us."

I looked across the courtyard and noticed Ross, Kip's older brother, standing in front of the shoe store talking with a group of guys. Ross was two years older than Kip, home for the summer from the state university, and working for a landscaping firm outside of Pascagoula.

"Why?" I asked Kip again. "Because he looks like he's hangin' out with fuckin' war criminals?"

"I didn't tell Mom I was taking the car."

❍

"I am not a pervert," Kip said, slamming the palm of his hand against the mall doors. As we walked outside we were hit by a sudden blast of heat, and I bowed my head, squinting against the onslaught of sunlight, and followed Kip across the shimmering black-tar parking lot.

"I can't just stan' around and do nothin'," Kip said with exasperation. "Silence means death."

Kip was not an easy going guy; there were days when he was wired tighter than a bomb. Short and solid, he was as agile as a tennis player but as restless as a racehorse. He had spiky blond hair and a chipped front tooth he refused to have capped because he thought it gave him a dangerous look. And at times he could be dangerous. He was prone to towering rages which would culminate in swearing bouts; once he even threw his fist against a window and ended up having stitches up to his elbow.

"I hate this place," he said, opening the car door. "It's so fuckin' hot." He took the beach towel from the back seat of the car and draped it over the front seat so that his skin wouldn't burn when he sat on the hot vinyl.

"How can you stand wearin' those jeans, man?"

"Easy," I answered. "They make me feel cool."

"And you think I'm weird," Kip said.

Kip had his left ear double-pierced, wore thin leather straps around his right wrist, and khaki shorts, and his T-shirts were studded with slogans or phrases or pins that said "Equality," "ACT UP," "Come Out, Come Out," or "Play Safe." The one he wore that day said simply, in giant pink letters, "PRIDE."

"I can't wait to get out of this place," Kip said. "One more fuckin' year and then I'm out of here. Next year I'm gonna be in P-town."

"Right, leave me here to rot."

"We can get a place together for the summer."

"My dad'll make me get a summer job next year," I said, pulling my arm away from the hot plastic armrest.

"Once I leave I'm never comin' back to this dump," Kip said.

"You can stay with me. You can get a job in P-town."

Kip had talked all summer about leaving Mississippi. But that day was his first offer for me to leave with him, to join him. It struck me as an odd addendum to his usual grumbling, but I had known Kip for years, and I knew his offer was genuine.

"Do you have any gum?" Kip asked.

"Nope," I said, and opened the glove compartment and put on Kip's sunglasses.

We drove to the car wash, then to get ice cream; then Kip decided we needed to spend some more militant time, and we went to Kmart and bought poster board, markers, and wooden sticks, stopped at the school parking lot and made placards, and then drove out to the hospital, just on the edge of the county line.

We paced in front of the entrance to the emergency room carrying our placards. Kip's read "Tell Me Why?" and mine said "We all have a right to live." Soon the heat began to make us both edgy and Kip started chanting, "Who's in charge?! Who's in charge?!," which soon escalated in volume when I joined in. It was easy for me to be caught up in Kip's fervor, we had been best friends since second grade, and I yelled and yelled and stomped along with him. I noticed the nurses at the window of an upper floor looking down at us, pointing, and at the same time felt my body breaking out into a river of sweat. Kip began screaming, heckling people as they walked in and out of the electronic sliding doors. Soon a security guard and a nurse with stern expressions were approaching us. I recognized the nurse as my neighbor Mrs. Donnell and stopped yelling. Kip noticed I had stopped and stopped himself.

"Hey, Buddy," Mrs. Donnell said to me.

"Hey," I answered sheepishly back.

"Why don't you boys come in and try heppin' us with some of these sick folk instead of yellin' so much," Mrs. Donnell said.

"We are helpin'," Kip answered, his face squinting and puffing up. "If we're disturbin', have us arrested."

"Naaah." Mrs. Donnell laughed. "Nobody's gonna arrest you. But you two ain't doin' no good hollerin' out here. We don't set the rules. We just try to hep people. You got a problem, you should complain to the gov'ment. Why don't you write a letter to the gov'nor?"

"Tell me why medical costs are so inflated!" Kip said. "Tell me why insurance companies get to pick and choose who and how much they want to cover, tell me why we're all gonna die from government neglect!"

"Jesus, Kippy, does your mom know you're so angry?" the security guard asked.

"Charlie Ray Fowler died at this hospital," Kip answered. "Because the government refused to acknowledge AIDS is an epidemic."

"It's so tragic about Charlie Ray," Mrs. Donnell said, shaking and bowing her head slightly. "He was a real nice kid. We're all just so upset by it." She put her arm on Kip's shoulder and it had a miraculous calming effect. She looked him straight in the eyes. "You boys go on out of here. Stay out of trouble. I say prayers for his mama every night."

I noticed Kip's shoulders slump, as if he had dropped a heavy load of trash. "They'll never understand," Kip said to me. He turned to Mrs. Donnell, edged his shoulders back, and faced her squarely again. "You'll never know," he said to her. "You'll spend your whole life ignorant." He ripped up his sign and threw it on the ground, turned around, and walked to his mother's car. Caught in another embarrassing situation, I looked at Mrs. Donnell, then at the guard, then turned around and silently followed Kip.

❍

Kip was his own rebel. At school he had developed a reputation as a weirdo punk and he had come to be generally ignored. Too often in the past, when a teacher had asked a question in class

and Kip had been called on for the answer, he would digress from whatever subject was at hand—math, English, history—to his political argument of the moment, something like why the whales should be saved because no one needs to wear lipstick or how the ozone layer was crumbling because the guy sitting next to him was wearing too much cologne. Over the years he had alienated almost everyone except for me. Why we remained friends, why he never turned on me, I was never really sure, but I think it had something to do with what Stacy Lash said to me about Kip when we were all in seventh grade. "He has the biggest crush on you," she said. "He'll do anything to get you to notice him." For a long time I thought that was such an odd statement; I always considered myself too studious and serious-looking for someone to have a crush on, but maybe that really was one of the reasons Kip kept jumping up and down in front of me all the time, punching me in the arm or rubbing his knuckles through my hair.

After the hospital, we drove around some more in the air-conditioned car, stopped at the bookstore, stopped to get cigarettes, stopped to get gas, stopped for sodas, stopped to look at the construction workers building the new strip shopping center off Highway 63. Then we went to Kip's house to sit in the air-conditioning and watch TV. After a few minutes of *Bewitched*, Kip again turned restless.

"We have to do somethin'," he said, fidgeting with the leather straps around his wrist. "I got an idea. Come on."

We were again in the car. It was late afternoon and the heat now felt as boxy as a winter coat. Even riding in the air-conditioned car, I could smell the trees and the grass and the sidewalk baking outside. Kip drove the car downtown and parked across the street from the police station.

"What's up?" I asked as Kip jumped out of the car, but he didn't remain still long enough to answer. He crossed the street and sat down in the middle of the road, right smack in front of the entrance to the police station.

"What's goin' on?" I asked when I caught up with him.

He looked up at me. "A sit-in. A demonstration," he said. "Like in the sixties, you know. Civil disobedience."

"Come on, Kippy, this could be dangerous," I said. "It's not like there are a hundred of us. Nobody's gonna see you sittin' down there by yourself. They're just gonna come on in and drive on top of you. Why don't you just do a hunger strike?"

He gave me a disgusted look. "I have to make a statement."

I looked around. The sun had dropped down, a fiery orange ball hung in the sky over Kip's shoulder, and I knew a driver, turning into the driveway, might be blinded by the light and fail to see the seated figure of Kip in the middle of the road. I ran back over to the car, found my placard, and crossed the street again. I stood behind Kip, waving my placard back and forth, just to be noticed, so Kip wouldn't be ignored sitting beneath me.

We stayed there for about an hour; cars pulling into the police station either went in the exit ramp, or weaved around us by jumping over the curb of the sidewalk. Every few minutes a cop would walk out of the station entrance and look at us, spit something into a walkie-talkie, and then leave.

Soon I noticed Kip's mother walking down the steps of the courthouse across the street, not far from where we had parked the car. She walked right past the car and over toward us. Kip, once he noticed her, refused to look at her again.

"Kippy, my phone's been jumpin' off the hook all day 'cause of you. What the hell is goin' on?" she said.

She was dressed in a gray lady's business suit, a pink scarf knotted around her neck, and she carried a stuffed leather briefcase. She had dyed her hair red since I had last seen her and I noticed, as she stood hovering over Kip, that her eye makeup was beginning to melt.

"People are dyin' and nobody is doin' anythin'," Kip said.

"And you think sittin' in the middle of the road is gonna solve the problem," she answered. "What about world hunger? Why

don't you go protest in front of McDonald's garbage cans?"

"Stop makin' fun of me."

"I'm not makin' fun of you," she said with an exasperated edge. "I've been talkin' to people all day long about that missin' girl over in Leakesville. I've been drug in and out of my office all day into this heat. Kippy, I am not makin' fun of you."

"What happens if the government decides to quarantine anyone with the virus; whose side would you be on then?"

"Kippy, I'm on your side," she said, wiping away the beads of moisture on her neck. "But nobody's gonna take you seriously sittin' in the middle of the road on the hottest day of the summer. They're just gonna think you're queer."

"I am, Mom. I am queer," Kip said. "This is important to me."

Her face took on a serious and solemn expression. She shifted her briefcase, trying to think of something to say. She looked at me, then up at the entrance to the police station.

"Mel! Mel!" she yelled to the cop who had come out of the door holding a walkie-talkie. "Will you come and arrest these two boys so I can go home and eat a decent meal?"

❍

The arrest was just a formality, but it nonetheless appeased Kip. We were fingerprinted, charged with disrupting traffic, fined a dollar each, which Kip's mother paid, and released in five minutes. Kip told Mel, the arresting officer, that he was being arrested as a statement against the government's inertia. We never even got to sit behind bars.

On the drive back to Kip's house, Kip convinced his mother to let us order pizza for dinner. We sat in the living room, eating in front of the evening news on television. Kip's mother spread her reports on the coffee table and started to read. Kip's brother, Ross, walked in and went right into his bedroom and slammed the door. A few seconds later he opened his door and yelled, "Mom, I got to

talk to you. Tell Kippy to get lost."

There might have been a fight, except Kip was once again restless and he offered to drive me home. Outside, the darkness of the night made the heat finally bearable, and the breeze which drifted up off the coast felt good.

Kip decided to take the long route back to my house, but when we passed the cemetery, he pulled the car over and stopped.

"What are we doin' here?" I asked as Kip jumped out of the car.

"Come on," he said. "I have to see where it is."

We hopped over the cemetery fence and walked along the path by the wall, a sliver of moonlight lighting our way. Kip stopped at a grave and read the inscription of a tombstone.

"*Ante oculos errant domus, urbsque et forma locorum*," Kip read. "I wonder what it means," he said.

"Somethin' like 'Thoughts of my home and the city are still in my eyes,'" I said.

"How did you know that?"

"I remember my mom tellin' me when she came home from the funeral," I said. "She's real close with Charlie Ray's mom."

"We'll all be dead before we're thirty if they don't stop this," Kip said.

I could sense his anger rising. He walked to a hill away from the graves and sat on the grass. I followed and sat beside him.

"What did you hear about him?" I asked.

"He was real smart in high school. He went to Yale and then lived in New York. He was some kind of movie lawyer."

"My mom heard he had been sick for two years," I said.

We were silent for a long time, listening to the sound of the traffic and the crickets. I lay back on the grass and looked up at the blanket of clouds that now covered the moon. Kip suddenly began to cry, quietly, but punctuated with deep heavy breaths.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Kip leaned back and turned his body toward me. "Tell me it

won't happen to us," he said, and pressed his head against my shoulder. His statement and sudden action left me with a loss of words, and I instinctively pulled his body closer to mine. The rest happened so quickly, impulsively. We began kissing each other, clothes were discarded, Kip pressed a condom in my hand, and I slipped it on. Instantly he was on top of me, and the night took on an urgency and passion I had never expected or experienced before. Feeling myself inside Kip, I grew dizzy; the friction of our bodies together, skin against skin, unleashed a measureless combination of pleasure and sweat. When he pulled off of me, the chill of the night air against my damp body felt bristly and awesome. As we lay there momentarily apart, I noticed the flash of red lights just beyond the cemetery wall. Kip noticed them, too, and he jumped up and grabbed his clothes.

"Come on," he yelled.

I grabbed my jeans and we raced for a patch of the woods and dressed hurriedly in the blackness of the trees. We crept as close to the wall as we could without being seen or heard, and we both gasped simultaneously at the scene in front of us. Kip's mother and brother were standing by a police car, holding flashlights, illuminating an officer pulling a body from the ditch below a portion of the wall.

We both ran out of the cemetery, jumped into Kip's car and drove around town the rest of the night. Later we learned the body was the missing girl from Leakesville and Ross had heard a story at the mall about a friend of a friend bragging about a rape the night before.

But before we learned that, before Kip dropped me off at my house sometime the next morning, we drove around town with the windows rolled down, the hot air blowing across our flushed faces, talking about Ross and Charlie Ray and sex and Kip's mom and the dead body by the side of the road. Every now and then Kip would stop the car and we would kiss and touch and hold each other and Kip would rattle off a list of all the places we could go together.

Then he would start the car and off we would go again, deep into the night. But what amazed me the most that night that summer was the way we didn't care where we were going. And how easily all the right roads materialized before us out of the dark.

Fearless

Though he harbored a virus within his body that frightened so many people and that so many more misunderstood, Barry did not think of himself as diseased or infected. He liked to consider that they, he and his virus, coexisted with each other, as many members of his support group preferred to define the relationship. So it always came as a surprise to Barry when someone found out he was HIV-positive and asked if he had any symptoms. "None," he always answered, though he would never vocally complete his thought, *none of your damn business*. And then he would feel the intensity of his interrogator's stare, scrutinizing him as if to prove he was lying, possibly even thinking that the red bump on his cheek was something more than a blemish, something far, far more frightening. Or if nothing physical was detected, nothing, nothing at all, his interrogator would look deeper, right into his soul, hoping to discover the roots of depression by the way he carried his body. After years of questions, frowning eyes, and too-sincere embraces, Barry was still learning how to channel his anger. In his support group he was always yelling at everyone, "Don't you realize how much stronger you are than this virus?"

David, however, could not shake off his years and years of loss. For him the epidemic had been going on far too long. He had lost most of his friends, his co-workers, the men he knew at the gym or the bars or the clubs or the baths. He had even lost his job and his health benefits when his boss died and the company

closed, a greeting card company that operated out of a Greenwich Village brownstone. In the early days of the epidemic David had volunteered, done fundraising, worked as a buddy; later, he marched in demonstrations and buried even more friends. Things had changed for David. When he had first moved to the city he was light and campy; now he felt he was entirely too serious, solemn, and glum. He approached everything now with anxiety.

❍

They met in the rain.

The night before the AIDS Walk had been a restless one for David. Two years ago he had walked with a group of twelve friends. Now, four were dead, one had gone to live with his parents, two had moved away from the city, two others were diagnosed. This year, everyone he knew who might walk was tired and burned out, bowing out graciously by explaining they would be out of town for the weekend. This year, the weatherman had predicted rain. In the morning when David got out of bed the rain fell so hard on the roof of his fifth-floor apartment it sounded like a subway car approaching but never arriving. It left him feeling impatient and uneasy, eager to settle on some sort of destination. Should he walk today? Would anyone walk? He called the weather line: rain all day. He showered and dressed and sat by the window, watching the raindrops splatter puddles like boiling water. He waited and waited, changing his mind every minute, finally deciding that he would just go to the registration point in Central Park, turn in his pledges and contributions, and then leave. When David got to the park, he was surprised at the number of people who were already there. Pausing atop a rock that provided a view of the Great Lawn, he was astonished by the sight of thousands of umbrellas, moving in and out of large random patterns like the kaleidoscopes he used to hold up to his eye as a boy. How could he leave now when everyone else was staying?

So David remained and walked.

That same morning, when Barry woke up he was curled around a guy with a goatee who snored through his mouth. He could not remember the guy's name, had no idea where he was in the city or if he even *was* still in the city; but he did remember they had met at a club near Avenue A last night when he had been waiting in the line for the restroom. When Barry slipped away from the guy and stood up beside the bed, he felt the chill in the air and heard the taps of raindrops against the window, just as the heaviness in his head shifted toward a headache. As he slipped on his jeans, the guy with the goatee rolled over, opened his eyes and looked at Barry, studying his face as if trying to memorize a criminal he would later have to identify, and then, without saying anything, closed his eyes and went back to sleep. On the street, Barry realized he was still in the East Village, and darted beneath awnings till he reached the corner of St. Mark's Place. Waiting for a cab on Lafayette, Barry noticed in a store window a poster for the AIDS Walk. He looked at his watch and then back at the poster. He knew he was too late. It had already started. And the rain made him feel really lousy. He hadn't planned on going anyway. Everyone at work had asked if he were participating. It was as if, because he was gay and positive and open about both, he was *expected* to participate. Barry hated that expectation, which is why, when he finally found a cab at the corner of Thirteenth and Broadway, he decided only at the late, last minute, he would go to the park. When the cab dropped him off, umbrellas were streaming out of the park onto Central Park West like a long, black river.

David, practical and worried about his health—he was always catching cold—was dressed in layers. He wore a T-shirt underneath a long-sleeve T-shirt underneath a sweatshirt, a sweater, and a denim jacket. He wore his chino pants because he felt they would dry out quickly, two pairs of socks, and his heavy winter boots. Wes, David's friend who now lived in Los Angeles, would have wisecracked that David looked like a walking Gap ad. David

carried the wide, oversized umbrella he normally hated using in the city because it meant dodging everyone else's umbrella. By the time he had walked to Ninety-sixth Street David's pants were soaked, his shirts and sweatshirt and sweater were damp, and he knew it was only a matter of time before he would feel the water seeping through his boots, chilling his toes. But he let none of this bother him. Around him everyone else was soaking wet too; as people passed him, David noticed everyone was collectively laughing or moaning or singing or chanting—the ever-resourceful New Yorkers had turned towels and shopping bags and banners and plastic garbage bags into survival gear.

Barry had stopped into Woolworth's to buy a cap before joining the Walk. He was soaked after the first five minutes; the wind had started whipping the crowd, and not even the long windbreaker Barry always wore around the city could keep him dry. *I'm such a jerk*, Barry thought, and lifted his head up to the gray sky, thinking about a way out of this madness.

Barry first noticed David when the crowd reached Riverside Park and volunteers were distributing frozen yogurt in small plastic cups to give the walkers energy or optimism or both. David, who was trying to hold his umbrella, eat the yogurt with a plastic spoon, fight off the wind and rain, and walk—all at the same time—had gotten his legs tangled in a discarded plastic bag. It was this cartoonish lunacy that captured Barry's attention, the waiflike Chaplinesque figure struggling with the weather and the attacks of urban garbage. But what pulled Barry even closer was David's scrubbed, boyish face—the fair complexion highlighted by the dark, doe-like eyes and the thick brown hair weighted down into curls from the pressure of the rain. Barry followed David to an overflowing garbage can where David lightly tossed his uneaten yogurt onto the top of the pile and untangled the garbage bag that was twisted around his foot.

David first noticed Barry when he turned and headed back into the crowd to continue walking. He noticed him again a little

later when he switched the umbrella from his right to left hand. But it wasn't until David thought he noticed Barry shiver that he moved in closer. Barry's clothes stretched heavily against his body, his sneakers left wet footprints behind him, even in the rain, and he had turned his cap backward and now walked with his hands clasped behind him, like a penitent priest, his head bowed to meet the onslaught of the weather. David noticed the jeans ripped just above the knees, the dark hair of Barry's arms matted against his skin where he had pushed up the sleeves of the windbreaker, the left ear triple pierced, the pendant—a cracked heart—that bounced atop his black T-shirt, the neatly trimmed black beard that covered Barry's face, even the raindrops suspended on the surface of the hair.

David held his umbrella higher, not shielding his face, worrying that if he were wet and cold, Barry, so lightly dressed, must be freezing. Finally, out of so much genuine concern, David walked over to Barry and asked, "Do you want to get under?" at the same time lightly shaking his hand that carried the umbrella. Barry turned and looked at David as if for the first time, moved underneath the umbrella and said, "Do you want me to hold it?" The voice is what caught David—the pitch so deep and heavy, so unexpected from such a slender man—almost magisterial, David thought, like that of an old, overweight English actor.

"No, I'm okay," David said, and then realized Barry's height and lifted his hand, as if holding a torch, so Barry would not have to stoop. Barry moved in closer and draped his arm around David's shoulder.

The physicality did not strike David as odd. Everyone was huddled and twisted together beneath umbrellas. But what happened as they walked and asked each other simple questions—"Are you from the city?" "Did you do the Walk last year?"—was that their eyes would lock as they looked down or up at each other and their touch would shift—David placed his arm around Barry's hip, Barry twisted his chilly fingers beneath David's T-shirts for

warmth. They walked this way, smiling and embracing, till they reached the park again. By then the rain had almost stopped and what was left of it was a soupy drizzle. That was when Barry turned to David and kissed him. David, caught up in the moment—the Walk, the rain, the closeness of Barry—lifted up onto his toes and leaned into Barry, feeling the water trapped within Barry's beard ribbon down his chin.

When they broke apart they looked awkwardly away from each other, till Barry took David's hand and led him to a bench. Barry sat on the top frame, his feet resting on the seat, and pulled a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his windbreaker. He offered one to David, who stood beside the bench and shook his head no, then lit it with a lighter he pulled from the pocket of his jeans.

"You should know I'm positive," Barry said, blowing a stream of smoke into the air.

David's back stiffened. In less than an hour he had imagined falling in love. Now, in two seconds, he was breaking up. "We should dry out," David said. He looked around, wondering what to do, knowing he was being tempted and tested. "Come on," he said, and this was when he took Barry's hand. "I'm not far from here."

They caught a cab at Columbus Circle, holding hands till the driver dropped them off at Ninth Avenue.

"Welcome to the slums," David said, unlocking the street door of his apartment building. "It's a straight climb to the top."

"Straight?" Barry said, grinning, and turned and kissed David. David, now, was slightly embarrassed, wondering if passersby on the street could see them in the building vestibule.

Inside David's apartment, Barry again kissed David, testing him once more, wanting to see if there was any fear in his kiss. David pressed his tongue into Barry's mouth and Barry gasped for a moment, pulled back and slipped his hand beneath David's shirts.

Now David leaned back and removed the denim jacket he wore; it landed on the floor in a wet *thlop*. He led Barry through a tour of the apartment till they stopped, standing, in front of the

bed. Barry again kissed David, this time at the neck. David felt the bristles of Barry's beard, one moment prickly, then wet, then slick like an animal's fur. David slipped his hands along Barry's forearms, amazed at their leanness, the tendons and veins popping right up to the skin.

They continued to peel wet clothing from each other—jackets, sweaters, shirts—rubbing their hands along the dampness that remained on their bodies, warming and drying each other's skin with the friction of their touch. Barry stepped easily out of his sneakers. David sat on the edge of the bed and unlaced his boots, then Barry leaned down on top of him and lifted their bodies into the bed. As they removed the rest of their clothing—socks and briefs—Barry was amazed by the thick muscles of David's body—the heavy arms, the wide shoulders, the deep muscles of his back, like those of a wrestler or a high school coach; he had imagined David would have had a more lean, boyish physique. David was mesmerized by the dark hair that covered Barry's entire body—coarse and bristly about the legs, flat and silken as it traveled up his stomach and splayed across his chest. He was surprised, too, by the narrowness of Barry's bones at his shoulders and hips—so slender and precise they appeared almost feline. He held on to Barry as they continued kissing; David was not really sure where his movements were going to carry him and he felt his body tensing instead of relaxing. It had been a long time since David had allowed himself to enjoy sex, a long time since he had even allowed himself the touch of another man.

Barry was not frightened at all. He held on to David and stroked him and kissed him. Sensing David's anxiety, Barry straddled David's thighs, his knees pressed against the mattress, next to David's hips. "It's okay," Barry said, and David felt the voice reverberate through his chest and he closed his eyes as Barry stroked him till he came. Barry then lay down beside David, and David turned his body toward him, their eyes locking as Barry then slowly jerked himself off.

David found a towel, dipped a washrag under the warm water, and returned to the bed, cleaning first himself and then Barry. Barry stayed and fell asleep and David held him from behind and watched TV in the darkened room. Through his mind ran the list of safe and unsafe guidelines. How safe was kissing? Jerking off? A shared washrag? David knew he was being silly; hadn't he done more dangerous things than kissing? Hadn't he cleaned PJ's catheter daily, washed shit off of Neal, wiped up Jeff's vomit? Just when David himself had nodded off, he realized Barry had gotten out of the bed, and he lifted his head away from the pillow and heard the shower running. David lay there until Barry came back into the room, a towel draped around his waist. "Everything's still wet," Barry said.

"There're some T-shirts in the top drawer," David replied, motioning to a bureau against the wall. "You can take one of those. And there's a pair of sweatpants in the bottom. They're probably too small, but they'll last till you get home."

"I'll give them back to you the next time I see you," Barry said.

There was a profound pause between them, as if neither wanted to say the next thing. "Will I see you again?" Barry asked.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't," David answered and watched Barry get dressed.

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By the next morning David had made up his mind that he wouldn't see Barry again, that he had only been caught up in the moment and that he and Barry weren't really compatible. Barry smoked, after all. And, though David would never admit it to anyone else, he was scared of becoming infected himself; this was something that could potentially lead to his own death. But there were photographs of the Walk in the newspaper. At home, after work, there it was again on the news. All those people in the rain. Wouldn't David's fears about contracting the virus make him, in

his own way, homophobic and bigoted? This was something he knew he had to confront. David called the number Barry had left, and when Barry answered, he asked how his day was, did he see the paper this morning, was he watching the news? Barry said he hadn't seen any of those things, but he had been thinking about David all day. They talked briefly about how wet they had been; wasn't it amazing, they laughed, David fully entranced by the sound of Barry's voice.

They made arrangements to see each other two days later.

They met for dinner at a crowded Mexican restaurant in Chelsea; Barry brought along the T-shirt and sweatpants he had borrowed from David. At a table in the back Barry ordered a margarita and lit a cigarette. This momentarily confused David; wouldn't someone who had tested positive give up smoking and drinking? "Is there a reason why your ear is pierced three times?" David asked instead.

The question surprised Barry. They knew, at this point, so little of each other that this seemed to him such an odd question to ask.

"The first time was for myself," Barry said. "The second time I don't remember. The third time was to really piss off my boss."

Barry explained he worked at a bank on Wall Street where everyone tiptoed around the conservative executives. He hated the job, hated the hours—he was a night person, really—hated wearing suits. His grandmother had found him the job when he had left home because he could no longer get along with his father. His first week at the job he grew his beard. The second week he was promoted. He didn't understand any of it, he said, lighting another cigarette.

David said he had moved to the city fifteen years ago, after graduating college, to become an actor. This made Barry turn pale, and he stared at David, stopped his talking by placing his hand on top of David's.

"How old are you?" Barry asked.

"Probably older than you," David answered.

"How old do you think I am?" Barry was stunned, caught off guard.

"Probably close to your thirties."

"I'm twenty-two."

"*Twenty-two*?" This stunned David. How old had Barry been when he had tested positive? David wondered. David sat there, shocked, wanting to cry.

"I thought we were the same age," Barry said.

David felt his face redden. "I'm flattered, I think," he said, hearing his own voice turn high and thin. "But I've been through a lot."

It was then that Barry realized how little he knew of David, and now, sensing this gap, this difference in age, he felt his caution returning, not wanting himself to know any more details about David. Every time he had gotten close to someone he ended up being pushed away. The virus, the damn virus. He wasn't even sick. It was particularly harder, he had discovered, with the older guys. Those that remembered what it was like before the epidemic began.

"How old are you *exactly*?" Barry asked.

"Exactly? Thirty-seven," David answered, "and seven months."

What saved Barry that night was David staring straight back into his eyes. *What does one say to a twenty-two-year-old?* David had thought at that moment, and heard himself rambling into a monologue about how he had never been able to make it as an actor because he didn't have the self-confidence to make it through auditions. Then he began talking about the job he had lost, the friends who had become sick, and he realized he was dropping his cards and guts and baggage right there on the table. At times, he admitted, he just wished he were someone else. Barry ordered another margarita.

"Do I scare you?" Barry asked.

David knew exactly what he meant. "Yes," David answered.

It was then that Barry realized that he had been sitting there with an erection.

They spent the night together at David's apartment.

When he was alone David could not sleep. He kept worrying. Why was he doing this? His gums bled easily when he flossed, his hands were full of paper cuts, he always nicked himself when he was shaving. There were a million ways he could become infected. He would work himself up into such a state of frenzy that the only way he could become calm was to remind himself that no one *really* knew what was going on, no one really knew what was causing this craziness. Then he would think of all the positive men he had kissed or had sex with in his lifetime. But that would lead to a roll call of the dead and David, now near tears, would sit in bed shaking his head, wondering, why was he here—negative, healthy, and depressed? What was going on? Finally, he would turn on the TV or the radio, hoping the sound would keep him from thinking too much, and he would lie down again, curling into a tight fetal position, waiting, waiting for sleep to return.

Barry, too, had trouble sleeping; he had come to believe things were now divided into "Us," the infected, and "Them," the healthy. He knew too many guys who had been dumped because they were positive. But what kept Barry up at night was the worry of who would be there for him if he got sick. He had never been able to ask others for help, but then he had never even tried to get close to anyone, not even the members of his support group—when he reached a point of connecting or caring for someone he usually asked to be placed into another session. At night Barry would imagine himself sweating from a high fever in a hospital bed, totally dependent, and he would be seized with panic. He did not trust his doctor. But Barry knew, too, he had progressed beyond his fear of being abandoned because of his serostatus. He

had pushed everyone away himself. He would get out of bed and walk around his darkened apartment, reminding himself it was not too late to find someone; he still had time. But it was important, he knew, not to get hurt. He had to protect himself, too.

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They met again on Saturday to see a movie in the Village.

David was already at the corner of Bleecker Street when Barry arrived and greeted him with a kiss on the lips. David gave Barry a weak and embarrassed smile, and as they walked together toward the theater, Barry took hold of David's hand. David, surprised, looked down at their hands, joined at his side, as if they were a scar or a blemish he were not supposed to acknowledge but had to inspect. David had never been comfortable with such open public affection between men, and he wondered now if Barry had misread him from their rainy walk last week. He looked out at the people passing them on the sidewalk, hoping to spot another male couple holding hands, but all he saw were startled expressions, eyes focused in their direction, right at their hands. David moved their joined arms so that their hands fell behind his back as they walked, trying to rationalize his timidity and uneasiness. Wasn't Barry's public affection just another thing he had to overcome or adjust to, like his youth and smoking and serostatus? Weren't they, after all, walking in the *Village*? Wasn't this *their* part of town? Finally, however, worried by the stares they were still receiving, David just let go of Barry's hand, knowing it must *really* look queer to be *holding* hands and *hiding* them.

By now David had reached a foolish state of confusion. He had not dated anyone in over nine months, not since his blitz period—the period during which he had answered personal ads, joined a dating club, and started calling a phone line—with predictable results: too many dates with too many wrong guys. But even in his younger days, even when he had been Barry's age, David had

never been able to master the protocols of dating. He had never known when to be aggressive, when to wait for a phone call, when to flirt with someone or how to catch a stare on the street. In those days he had felt awkward and unattractive, always standing on the outside of gay life; even the clues and codes mystified him—what were all those keys and colored handkerchiefs *really* about anyway? But sex had always been obtainable for him—he was always approached at the bars or the baths; in fact, he went to those places to find reassurance that he was *not* awkward and unattractive. In those days dating to him meant having sex. It's why he got together with a guy for a second time. No matter what incompatibilities there were, sex was a way of connecting that made them compatible, even if only briefly.

Now, everything about Barry bewildered David—the touching, the holding hands in public, the fuzzy feelings David felt inside while they were together. But David also thought that his relations with Barry so far showed he had not made any progress after all these years; what did they have in common with each other, really, besides their desire to have sex with each other? David had hoped that by now, at his age and having survived this far into the plague, he would have reached something *beyond* a sexual relationship. Was he merely using Barry as reassurance of his own attractiveness or was he instead simply smitten by the attentiveness? Was he afraid of falling in love or worse, falling in love and being abandoned, or worse still, falling in love and watching someone die? Was the real issue Barry's serostatus? Or had David accepted that through the act of sex? Was David simply *incapable* of a relationship? But David could justify even now that Barry wasn't physically his type. Wasn't he usually attracted to and more interested in guys his own height and age—those boyish, actor friends, conservative and nonthreatening, who knew the same subjects he did and could talk in the same shorthand about the theater or books or movies? But even this was discouraging; somehow everyone David knew or met these days was already

attached to someone richer or better looking or taller or smarter. Perhaps what David needed was someone younger, someone uninhibited and dauntless.

Though Barry was drawn to David because of his boyish looks, Barry knew he and David were really not compatible. And it had nothing to do with David's age, nothing to do with David's reticence or overeducated response to everything. Emotionally Barry typically found himself drawn to men who were adventurous and willing to take risks, the reason why he was captivated by the spontaneity of the club crowd, and those who were ready to just go out there and dance and sweat it out. But physically he was also wildly attracted to those macho-masculine men who were tall and unapproachable-looking, rough around the edges, the straight construction worker/cowboy types, the kind who presented as much danger as domination. "In other words, someone unavailable," a woman in his support group had laughed the night Barry had explained this. That was the first group Barry had left. He had changed therapists for the same reason when, in a session, his doctor suggested that perhaps what he was searching for was a surrogate for the father he felt had abandoned him.

When Barry had brought the subject of David up at his support group meeting that week, Ken, an older man—even older than David—who believed he specialized in being dumped, warned Barry to be prepared for the worst. "People don't change," Ken said. "If he hesitates now, he'll hesitate later." Dustin, a year younger than Barry, yelled at Barry and said he should just forget about David. "It's his fault anyway, man," Dustin said. "They fucked around for years. Those kind of guys gave us AIDS." That prompted an argument within the group, angry cross-examinations and challenges displacing Barry's appeal for advice.

Earlier that week, when David had phoned his friend Stuart and asked if he, Stuart, would ever date someone who was positive, there followed that notorious gap of silence. By the time Stuart spoke, David already knew his answer.

"You're putting your life at risk," Stuart said. "No one else. *You* have to make that choice."

When David pressed him harder, what would Stuart do, Stuart again avoided the question. "I have a lover," Stuart said. "I'm lucky I don't have to be out there."

David called his friend Wes in Los Angeles and asked him the same question. This time there was no hesitation. "No," Wes said bluntly. David and Wes had slept together years ago. Now Wes worked for an organization that raised funds for AIDS research. When David pressed Wes to explain his decision, Wes answered succinctly, "I can't work with it *and* live with it." Later, toward the end of their conversation, Wes asked David, "Do you feel something for him?"

"Yes," David answered honestly, but then he remembered he had also felt something for John-Boy on *The Waltons* and Michael on *thirtysomething*.

David wished Barry was negative. Barry wished David was positive.

They held hands throughout the movie.

Afterward, Barry took David home to his apartment on the Upper East Side.

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David had not been aware of how much money Barry had; it was certainly not apparent in Barry's choice of clothing or restaurants, not even hinted at in his attitude. Barry's apartment was on the top floor of a Park Avenue building, decorated with dark, bulky wooden antiques and tapestries, large floor-to-ceiling windows providing a city skyline view. Barry explained that the apartment and furnishings belonged to his grandmother, though she had not used the place in several years, since Barry had asked to move in; she now stayed at her house in Westchester.

"Do you want a drink?" Barry asked, and David, disappearing

into the cushions of an overstuffed couch, shook his head and said, "No, I'm fine," and noticed as Barry opened the bar, the crystal ice bucket and glasses, the bar stocked with an assortment of foreign liqueurs.

For the last few years David had lived on the brink of poverty. David had paid for Neal's funeral with his own money, bought medication for Jeff, loaned PJ money he knew he would never see again. David had lost jobs, quit others, moved in and out of apartments so many times that he had now become so poor, so behind on all his loan payments and credit cards, that his creditors had taken to calling him periodically to check on his financial status—was he working, why were the payments late, could he send something in now, just a little? Sometimes David believed if it weren't for his regular collectors—Mr. Shaw from American Express, Mrs. Watson from Chemical MasterCard, Andrea from Citibank—his phone might not even ring at all. These financial problems had produced in David such a lack of self-esteem that he could no longer listen to his friends' stories of European vacations or trips to the Caribbean, no longer hear about the cars they were considering buying, no longer care, even, what new plays or restaurants or movies they had discovered—everything seemed so unattainable to him. Sometimes David tried to shrug it off with a joke, saying that he half expected one day to walk into a bank or a store and hear alarms go off and have security guards rush at him, yelling, "You owe us money! You owe us money!" But the truth was, David was worried that now no one would take him seriously; could anyone ever find him attractive when he was living with such troubles? David had also come to believe, in that same lighthearted manner, that the only person who could fall in love with him now would have to be someone obscenely rich. Or would have to be either a doctor or a psychiatrist, someone who could talk David out of all of his neuroses.

He told none of this to Barry, of course. Rich, well-to-do Barry. Barry who drank and smoked too much. Barry who could march

in the rain without even an umbrella for protection. Barry who was fifteen years younger than David but looked four years older. Barry with whom he had such a difficult time finding things to talk about, finding interests they shared besides that crazy, intense chemical attraction of sex. Barry who was positive and seemed to live, not more carefully, to protect his health, but precariously, teetering on a ledge.

Always at the back of David's mind, of course, was Barry's status. What if Barry got sick? Would David take care of him? As he had done with the others. Could he *really* go through that again? David had never had a lover—a string of boyfriends, yes, but never a lover—and his closest, most intimate moments were the ones he had spent washing PJ when he was sick, helping Neal walk from the bed to the bathroom, feeding Jeff when he was too weak to do it himself. There was always the possibility that Barry was stronger than the virus; wasn't the news full of reports of weaker strains and longer life expectancies? But for David, there was always the looming possibility that he, himself, could slip across that line and become infected.

Barry was acutely aware of the division between himself and David because of the virus. It was an issue with every man he had met and dated since he had heard his diagnosis. Barry refused to believe that sex was a moral or legal dilemma for him. The problem was unsafe sex. He knew the facts; he operated within the guidelines. But what upset Barry was the way gay men had become interested in safe men, not safe sex. Most negative men would not even consider dating a positive man; ironic, Barry thought, that in a community so passionate about civil rights, discrimination, and antibias legislation, there were still men who would walk away from him the moment he explained he was positive. Even the personal ads reeked of codes: *healthy playmate seeks same, responsible man wanted*, or, more blatantly, *negatives only need reply*. And now even the positives had made the division wider: special bar nights for positives, dating clubs for positives, special newsletters

and support groups and circle jerks for positives. All Barry really wanted was someone who would not be afraid of him. The concept of safe sex was that safe sex was for everybody, but HIV had now become more than an opponent for some men; it had become, in this disturbed and distorted fashion, the antagonist of love. For years Barry had never really wanted a lover; what he enjoyed about sex was the raw, physical anonymity of it. When Barry left home at sixteen he knew nothing about safe sex—his parents had created such a protected environment for him that the equation of sex with death was not even considered. Barry believed that what had happened to him—his sero-conversion in the early period of exploring his sexuality—was no different than what had happened to other men in the early days of the epidemic. He could not blame himself any more than he could really blame his parents or his teachers for their lack of perception. He discussed none of this with David, of course. Now, he joined him on the couch, placed his drink on a glass-topped coffee table and lit a cigarette.

David had given up smoking, drinking, pot and other recreational drugs. Sometimes David felt he had gone through every modern gay phase possible—the theater phase, the bar phase; the opera, baths, gym phases; the disco phase; even the twelve-step and activist phases. Sometimes all this history just seemed to have worn him down. What was left, David felt, was a hollow shell, waiting to be refilled. As David watched Barry take a deep, long drag off of his cigarette, he realized that of course Barry should smoke—it made sense—what did Barry really have left to lose? David reached out and touched Barry on the arm and it was here that Barry recognized, for the first time, that this was not a touch of sympathy or concern but one of understanding. Barry leaned over and kissed David, and David, at that moment, tasted everything—the cigarette, the alcohol, the passion and struggle of another man's life.

It was David who suggested they move to the bedroom; Barry led the way.

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David spent the night tossing, unaccustomed to the bed and Barry beside him. David had never liked sleeping over with someone; it always seemed to shift a relationship into a more intimate and awkward level. Barry woke up intermittently throughout the night, lifting himself out of sleep to remember who lay beside him; Barry seldom had overnight guests, preferring instead to let himself be absorbed into someone else's life. Before them was a large window with a view of the night sky. David, waking, noticing the deep violet clouds, was reminded of those nights years ago when he would stumble out of a disco or the baths, his mind tinted by alcohol and drugs, and he would suddenly notice, upon turning a corner, a huge, wide pocket of the Manhattan sky. It always made him feel vivid and indestructible; but now, looking at it through his sleepy haze, it made him feel old and defeated. How could he deny or fault Barry for wanting that same illusion, the invincibility of youth? As the morning light began to outline the clouds like veins of marble, David reached out and drew Barry toward him. They made love again, and afterward, David held Barry in his arms, Barry's head pressed against David's chest, David stroking his fingers through Barry's hair. They stayed that way, watching the morning sun bleed into the horizon and Barry felt, for the first time since his diagnosis, that something was attainable for him, a future was possible with another man. David felt he was capable of protecting Barry from every harm, of helping him navigate the muddy river of youth.

Barry was the first to get out of bed. He dressed and went to the deli on Lexington Avenue and brought back the Sunday *Times*, bagels, and coffee. David sat at the grand piano and sight-read a book of Jerome Kern songs.

It was a beautiful spring day and Barry opened the windows, causing the light to break through in rays and the sheer curtains to billow and curl as they would in a movie. They showered and

decided, each to himself, that they were not tired of each other nor ready to part, and they agreed to take a walk to Central Park, amazed that only a week ago it had been so rainy when they met.

On the way to the park Barry noticed young men everywhere: young men dressed in tank tops and shorts, young men carrying backpacks and gym bags, young men wearing caps and sunglasses and Walkmans. At one point they passed a young man holding hands with his girlfriend, a man Barry found so handsome that he upset Barry's balance, weakened his knees, made him momentarily lose his logic. Of course David had noticed Barry's reaction; David had also noticed the girlfriend noticing Barry. Barry knew he had to find a way to handle this distraction, knew that if he were to make a relationship with David work he would have to channel his obsessions in other ways, or at least *discuss* them and acknowledge them to David. David, however, knew he had to accept Barry's preoccupations, weren't they, after all, a distinction of being both young and gay? Near Fifth Avenue a gaunt man with a ragged beard crossed in front of them and it was here that David recognized the man as someone he had seen years ago in his gym. David averted his eyes, embarrassed and upset, feeling guilty once again for surviving, guilty for being alive and healthy and negative when so many of his friends and lovers and boyfriends and tricks were either positive, ill, dying, or dead. Barry, now realizing something had passed between David and the man, took David's hand, and it was then that David gave it willingly, here realized that one had to have such an immense courage to date these days—to be fearless, really—to fall in love. At that point David became immune to everyone's stare, existing blissfully in a moment of affection.

It was a perfect day for the park. They lay on the ground at Sheep Meadow watching a boy and his father fly a kite, then walked to the pond and watched the miniature sailboats, then rented bikes and cycled around the horse-drawn carriages. They

ate hot dogs and ice cream from vendors. David felt as young as Barry had imagined him to be. Barry moved everywhere with the lightness of hope in his step. They did not part until twilight, kissing unashamedly in front of everyone at Columbus Circle, beneath a sky fading as brilliantly as it had arrived.

That was the end of their first week together.

What happened next was David got sick. A cold. A bad one. He had a fever and deep pains in his chest, as if he had pulled a muscle. Bad enough to cancel a date with Barry. Barry offered to come over anyway and cook David something, though when Barry heard himself saying that he thought it sounded false. Cook what? he thought; he didn't know how to cook. "I'll bring you some medicine. Or something," Barry said.

"No," David replied, not wanting to seem vulnerable. "I need to just shake this myself."

Barry was pissed when he hung up; he felt David was using this as an excuse to push him away. David was not really *that* sick; the issue was once again that Barry was positive. Barry went out to a bar, then to a club, then home with a guy named Allen.

Barry was not home when David called later that night. David left a message on Barry's answering machine that some medicine would be nice, so would some company. Barry did not get the message till the following day when he got home from work. When Barry called David, David did not pick up the phone, thinking it was Mr. Shaw from American Express, calling to inquire about when another payment could be expected. Barry was so upset he could not leave a message on David's answering machine. Days passed. Barry went out to another club. David, over his cold, agonized over whether to call Barry again, then decided, impulsively, to visit a friend out of town.

Time passed between them.

Months later, sometime near Christmas, David spotted Barry through the window of a store on Christopher Street, his arm draped around another man. It was then that David crossed the street to the other side, not wanting to become upset, wanting only, instead, to survive.

EVERYBODY IS ALWAYS SOMEBODY ELSE

"Never fall in love with an actor," Jake said to me the first day I met him and I followed him back to the East Village apartment where he was crashing that week. We had started talking while waiting for our names to be called to audition for a touring production of a Broadway revival, and in a hallway of self-involved actors he seemed to be the one most capable of drawing a lot of attention. It was late September, one of those stifling hot Manhattan days at the end of a summer, and Jake was a big fellow dressed in shorts and a sleeveless blue shirt, ragged at the seams of the armholes and accenting his large muscles and the trail of sweat left in their wake. He had a tough, monkey-shaped head with large ears and a bald scalp, softened by a big smile and blue eyes, his round jaw covered with day-old black stubble. But it was his voice that drew everyone's immediate attention: rough, hoarse, guttural, and raspy, like his vocal chords had been seared simultaneously with ice cubes and hot coals. It was no surprise for me to find this kind of man in the potential lineup of actors that afternoon. The touring musical was about singing and dancing con men.

Jake was complaining to another fellow about a lost ATM card when I took my seat beside him to wait my turn, and when the other actor diverted his attention toward a script he had in his

lap, Jake, without missing a beat, turned to me and continued his story. The lost card had not been lost at all but canceled and had something to do with Jake's ex-girlfriend, or ex-wife, or both of them, and the late alimony and child-support payments he had reimbursed his parents in New Jersey for paying to the ex-wife or ex-girlfriend, and, though I wasn't capable of putting all the facts of the story together into a coherent narrative, I offered him my empathy, thankful to be caught up in his drama and able to deflect my own nervousness over auditioning.

Neither of us was cast that day, but when I left the building Jake was waiting on the street, smoking a cigarette. "How'd it go?" he asked me, and I mumbled something or another about it being a valuable learning experience for me, since I had not auditioned much. I had only gotten my union card a few weeks before through a summer stock apprentice program when a gratis "walk-on" for my parents' financial investment in the theater company had turned into an actual replacement role after another actor became ill. I had hastily moved to Manhattan and was working at an answering service in midtown as I made my rounds of auditions. Jake, I would learn, had several professional credits, the most recent as an understudy for an off-Broadway play where he had performed a role onstage nineteen times before the production closed. Now, he was working at a copy shop where he had called in sick that morning in order to make the audition. As he lit up another cigarette, he asked me if I wanted to get something to eat, and since I didn't need to return to work that afternoon—my shift was over—I agreed. We were headed downtown when Jake impulsively decided he needed to make one final desperate side trip to his bank to get some money.

His account was frozen, or at least that was what I surmised from his ranting as he exited the bank flustered and reaching for another cigarette. I suggested that we find a diner where I could treat him to a meal but he recommended a cheaper alternative of "cooking up something back at my place." And so we walked the

fortysomething blocks downtown and stopped at a bodega near where he was staying and bought ham, bread, and chips. "Nothing but the basics," he said, smiling and tossing in a beer for each of us. I wasn't at all skeptical or skittish of spending more time with Jake, even though he clearly outsized me if our growing friendship proved to be an unlucky encounter. He had thrown out enough lines about ex-girlfriends and his kids to make me believe that he wasn't interested in me sexually and, as for being conned out of more money, the groceries and the beer were about all my finances could handle unless I accessed the credit card my mother had pressed into my hand the day I left home, something I refused to let happen unless faced with an emergency.

The meal was simple and delicious. Jake's crash pad was a studio with a hot plate for a stove and bookcases made from plastic milk crates. While I was looking through the collection of plays and cast albums Jake's friend had assembled, Jake smoked and talked about acting. He was describing a gibberish technique a particular famous director was known to make actors use during warm-ups at rehearsals, when he suddenly changed the subject and asked me, "You wouldn't mind if I kissed you? I think you've got great lips."

I laughed in response, not over Jake's suddenly sincere and fluttery delivery or his speculation that I might be straight and be offended by a kiss from another man, but because I had never been handed that line before. (I'd been told I had nice ears and model-ready hands, but never great lips.) Then I nodded and we both looked at each other, until Jake stood up and lifted me into a kiss.

I was still a skinny thing, a dark blond and willowy boy, twenty-two to Jake's larger forty-three-year-old physique, and even though I had only had a handful of sexual encounters with men by then I knew I wanted more than the deep, smoky kiss Jake offered me. Jake was exactly the kind of man I was attracted to—older, interesting, and well built—and I had spent the entire time sitting

in the apartment with an erection I had been trying to will away. As we kissed, my hands traveled beneath his shirt and rested at the cool, sweaty small of his back until Jake broke away from me and tugged the polo shirt I was wearing over my head.

I ejaculated the moment we were both undressed and lying together on the narrow mattress of the bed. I was as inexperienced in the ways and sexual attentions of other men as I was in reciting lines from a play onstage, and Jake accepted my early orgasm with the pride of a rookie ballplayer hitting a home run on the first pitch. He wiped up the come I had spewed on his chest, reached beneath the bed frame and pulled out a shoe box that held an assortment of dildos and lubricants. "This should get me warmed up till you're ready," he said, growling out a laugh and lifting one of the larger sized toys in his fist. But it was soon apparent to both of us that even though I had ejaculated, I had not lost my erection, and his response was a surprised and gravely, "My, you *are* a young one." I was so young and innocent-appearing, in fact, that he called me "baby" that day, a term of endearment as he held me in his arms, "Baby, that was so good. We're gonna do it again." The way he said it sounded both sincere and rehearsed, and though we did follow through with doing it a few more times that day (and night), that moment was when he followed with the advice of never falling in love with an actor. "You'll never feel appreciated," he said. "You'll never feel loved enough. No. Don't ever fall in love with an actor."

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I never believed I had enough self-confidence to become a working actor, which was why, after a few weeks of unsuccessful auditions, it seemed more natural for me to find an offstage job. In the next few months I worked on various off-off-Broadway productions and showcases as an assistant stage manager, a lighting operator, a prop person, and an usher. I hadn't given up my dream of being an actor, though; I took classes, volunteered for readings, practiced scenes

with other actors, memorized monologues and songs to use for future auditions, though my primary focus soon shifted to earning an income in order to be able to continue living in the city. Jake had made it clear that I shouldn't hope for any romantic attachment from him, though he was the one who kept our paths crossing my first year in Manhattan. He would call me for dinner, call me about an audition, call me to borrow a few bucks until a check cleared, or call me to crash at my apartment until a house-sitting arrangement or a sublet or a roommate possibility would open up. And every time I saw him I would be drawn into one of his heavy-nicotine dramas—a conflict with one of his son's teachers, an ex-girlfriend who had filed a restraining order against him out of jealousy, his mother's worry that he would end up drug-addicted and homeless on the street. And each time he would draw us together, kissing and stroking and fucking until we were both sweaty and sore and ready to do it again.

Even though he would not let me love him, Jake was beneficial in helping me become more sexually comfortable with other men. Not that I developed a preference for anonymous and detached sexual encounters—no, that was never my case and not the kind of man I wanted to be—I was much more of a romantic, shying away from the romping grounds of other gay men of my generation, avoiding the dark, bushy Rambles, the abandoned West Side piers, the bathhouses and sex clubs downtown. In fact, Jake's conduct was responsible for leading me in the opposite direction, helping me recognize that every man I met was a potential narrative—someone full of history and specifics and dramas. Mark was a tall drink of water from a small town in Texas who worked as an accountant, though I met him when I auditioned for a role in a chamber musical he had composed. I didn't get the part—I was as bad a singer as I was an actor, though I did get to sample Mark's musical equipment: a soft, whispery voice in bed and a fat, jazzy cock he was eager to slide inside me. Ian was an overweight, blond, bespectacled landscape painter who made more money

as a commercial photographer of food products. He had moved to the city from Dublin with his younger and very competitive brother and they shared a loft near the railroad tracks in upper Chelsea, where I was only invited into Ian's bed when the brother was not around. Peter was a stockbroker who smoked a lot of pot and wanted to be a film director. "Whadya think about this idea?" he would ask me before I would drift off to sleep when I spent the weekends at his apartment. Peter was a dreamer who had never directed anything, not even traffic. Instead, he was developing screenplays based on alternative histories: what if the Germans had invaded America, what if Russia had used atomic bombs against the Chinese, what if Kennedy hadn't been assassinated?

"I'm not sure he would have divorced Jackie for Goldie Hawn," I would say when he theorized about Kennedy's second term in office, for instance.

"Well, he wouldn't have dated Jane Fonda," he would answer. "What about Streisand? Or Liza Minnelli?"

Our sex life was not nearly as inventive or creative as his plots, which might have been one of the reasons Peter did not make it beyond a ten-week affair. A few days after our breakup in fact, I met a waiter-slash-dancer at a jazz class I was taking in a dingy room that overlooked the gaudy lights of Times Square. Stan reminded me a lot of myself: a boyish-looking fellow from the South with an interest in movies, music, and the theater. He was the first guy I slept with whom I suspected might be HIV-positive. We dated a few times but when I went over to his apartment, he wouldn't take his T-shirt off during sex because he didn't want me to see the rash that covered his chest. Marshall, however, told me up front that he was positive. He was a copy editor at a newspaper who was working on a novel when I met him at a benefit in the Village. He had a long, lean physique, a dark full beard, and a deep voice infused with testosterone. He had a passion for yoga and alternative therapies, but he was also a bad-boy character full of alibis. Lying next to him in my bed I would listen to him describe

how he had fooled his lover into believing that the nights he spent with me were really impromptu out-of-town business trips as a fact-checker for a breaking story. This was when I realized I might never find a man who could love me as much as I could love him and I arrived at this conclusion: if he cheats on his lover, he will cheat on anyone, including me. By then I had matured from a boy who was awkward with sex into a man who wanted to know what it was like to be completely and blissfully in love.

❍

My newfound logic did not prevent heartache or heartbreak, particularly where Jake was concerned. Each time I saw him I was more in love with him than the time before, and the more comfortable he grew talking of his other sexual partners—male or female—the more it stirred my quiet jealousy.

Eventually I took a full-time permanent job working for an entertainment publicity firm where I sat at a desk from nine to five answering the phones, stuffing press releases into envelopes, and fielding requests for interviews or photographs of our clients. I dated a number of actors during this period, none of whom progressed beyond casual affairs, and got together enough with Jake to give him a set of keys to my apartment after my roommate moved out and I could afford the place on my own. Jake didn't move in, of course; no, that would be going against everything he stood for and he was aware that he would have been taking advantage of my growing fondness for him. In fact, we were both saved the torture of my feelings when he got a job with a touring production and was out of town for almost two years, only flying into the city for an audition or a commercial spot before departing to catch up again with the tour. One night, however, I arrived at my apartment to find him cooking in my kitchen. With him was a thin, olive-skinned young woman named Nina whom I knew to be one of his ex-girlfriends, an actress he had met at a class, I believe,

though I could not remember any specifics about why she had become his ex. They invited me to share dinner with them—pasta with vegetables and a cream sauce, salad, and a bottle of wine. It was an uncomfortable dinner—I felt like an outsider in my home, even though Jake chattered away about the various accidents and mishaps on the stage of his touring show and I tried to down as much wine as possible. While we were cleaning up, Jake lit a joint and, thinking it might make me more relaxed, I took a hit when it was offered to me. Soon Jake and Nina were stoned and dancing to the oldies-but-goodies on my album of the soundtrack of *American Graffiti*. I knew where it was all going even before it arrived there because Jake kept looking at me and asking, "You cool with this, aren't you, buddy?" Jake and Nina were twirling and sweating and smiling and clutching each other. They both tried to involve me in their dancing and groping and when Jake or Nina or both of them had maneuvered the three of us to the bedroom, I stood by the bed watching them kiss each other until Nina leaned over and kissed me on the neck.

She might as well as have socked me in my stomach. It wasn't that I was a misogynist or repelled by women, but I thought I had consciously given up all romantic and sexual entanglements with girls when I had left the South for New York because I had recognized my sexual attraction was elsewhere. I kept up a politeness and a gentlemanly composure as long as I could, deflecting their further advances until I became a voyeur instead of a participant. When they were both undressed, lying on my bed, Jake ready to penetrate a willing Nina, I left the room, unable to watch anymore.

I'd tried to be as easy going and sexually adventurous as I could make myself: curious, enlightened, willing, versatile, though I would be the first to admit that I was my own biggest obstacle. I wasn't resistant to the theory of a threesome, or even one that included a woman, only resistant to participating in one with Jake whoever the third partner was. I was just as much of a failure

here in my honest affections for him as I was as an actor trying to pretend I was someone else. I wanted Jake as my own and on my terms, something that was impossible both with him and everyone else I'd been interested in romantically in my life so far.

In my bathroom I ran the water for a shower, stepped inside the tub, and then sat down, folding myself up so that the water was beating on my skull and neck and back as if I were a turtle caught in a sudden downpour. I'd like to think that it muffled my crying, that it stopped me from hearing or imagining what was going on in my bed, but my disappointment got the better of me until I was soaked and exhausted. When I finally turned off the water Jake was tapping at the bathroom door, rasping out in a throaty plea, "Jimmy, babe, open up. I didn't think this would upset you. I didn't think it would matter, buddy. Open up, I didn't mean to hurt ya."

When I finally came out, Nina had left. That night Jake crashed on my sofa bed, while I tossed and turned in the bedroom, trying to find ways to forgive him.

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Albee was the most effeminate of all my boyfriends and lovers, pretty as a girl with jet black hair, ivory skin, and long, twiggy eyelashes. His father was a Jewish tailor and his mother a woman he had met and married while stationed in the army in Korea. Raised in the new-age era in the suburbs of San Francisco, Albee came to New York City hoping to make it as a fashion designer. I had toughened up quite a bit romantically by the time we met, or, rather, I had been through enough heartbreak by then not to want to keep chasing it, so it was Albee who did all the wooing and courting. But he was also a modern man, calm and meditative and full of passive-aggressive attributes; early in our relationship, for instance, he would plead for me to stay over at his apartment and then, once we'd finished our fucking, he would sit at his drafting table working on his illustrations oblivious of my presence as I read

or surfed channels on the TV. In many ways Albee domesticated me and turned me into a man capable of enjoying the complexities and compromises of a relationship. I began relishing our silent time together as much as I did our more sexual time, learning how to cook a squash casserole in his kitchen, for example, and then, later, when we lived together, spending time writing at the computer. I'd long ago abandoned the public relations job in the same way I had abandoned my quest to be an actor. Instead, I was now fully outside the entertainment area and the theater world, working at the in-house library of a corporate insurance firm in order to keep myself flush in money and able to spend my free time with Albee.

The more in love I became with Albee the less I needed a similar verification from Jake, so Jake became a good friend and was pleased that I had someone like Albee in my life. Jake still wasn't interested in settling down with one person, man or woman, even though he was now in his fifties, and he'd garnered some professional notoriety by playing gangsters and Mafia men in various movies and plays. Albee and I even traveled to New Haven one year to see Jake in a show that he was coproducing about a money-laundering scheme, which, unfortunately, never played anywhere else but that small, uncomfortable and unair-conditioned theater.

Jake was also a support for us when Albee became sick. I didn't disclose it at first but the New Haven trip and Albee's thinning appearance made Jake aware of the battle we were facing. Jake knew of specialists through friends or friends-of-friends that he put us in touch with, but the truth of the matter was the doctors weren't all that sure what anyone was facing, nor did they understand Albee's collapsing immune system. Albee was thirty-three when he died and I was thirty-five. We had been a couple for more than five years. Two of those we had spent trying to restore his health. He died a happy man in love. I survived as the lonely, guilt-stricken partner.

❍

Jake died a year after Albee. It was an unexpected death, a stroke that took him out in one swift punch. He was fifty-six, or fifty-two, depending on who you were talking with at the funeral. I'd gotten a call from Nina, who had kept up a casual acquaintance with me in the aftermath of our aborted threesome. Nina loved Jake as much as I did, wanted to be Jake's second wife, wanted to have a child by him, and she had pursued and chased him in ways that I could not do myself without losing some self-respect. Nina wasn't the only woman in Jake's bed, of course. At the funeral home on the Upper West Side where Jake was laid out, a shocked gathering of his friends, family, and former lovers assembled for an impromptu memorial. "He wasn't always gracious onstage," an actory-looking blonde woman in her mid-twenties said. "But offstage he was as generous as they come. No one could top him there." Another woman whom I recognized from a daily soap said she wanted to remember Jake as "a smoky mess, but always ready to party." "I'd like to remember Jake as a devoted father," his ex-wife finally said, cutting off all the bedroom innuendo. "No matter what our differences were, he was always there for our sons." Jake's sons, Zack and Greg, fourteen and sixteen, sat with their heads tucked down and their fingers balled into fists, squirming and shifting, as restless as their father had been.

I sat there quietly, unable to speak, remembering that Jake had been present with me the day in that not-too-distant past when Albee died in our apartment. Sean, a stage manager, got up and said what a terrific drinking buddy Jake had been. Next, an older woman in her late sixties said she'd like to remember Jake as the kind of New Yorker you were always surprised to find in the city. "Someone to help you move furniture or pick up your dry cleaning for you if you were in the hospital." Then Tony, a young, handsome dark-haired man, rose up from his chair and said that Jake was always full of suggestions and advice, not just for acting but how to survive in the world. "Always have a backup," Tony repeated Jake's advice, which when he said it, I remembered hearing Jake tell me

too in one of our long-ago postcoital embraces. "Always have a backup monologue or a backup scene. A backup profession. A backup lover." This prompted an elderly man to stand up and say that he might have known things about Jake that no one else was aware of. "Enough about all that loving and living crap," the man said. "Jake was a terrific bricklayer. Simple as that. He worked for me when he was a teenager. First job he ever had. He caught on to it right at the start. Any man who can build a solid, level wall is a decent man in my view. And Jake was a decent man. I saw that right away."

Jake's death served to remind me not only of how much I had loved him and the deep impression he had made on my life, but how little I had truly known and understood his life and times with others. "Everybody is always somebody else in this town," he once said to me. "The cabdriver wants to be a star. So do the secretary and the cop. And we're all a bit different to different people. A guy at an audition probably hates my guts thinking I'm going to get the part, but the guy in the audience doesn't see me like that. He probably hates me because the play stinks or maybe he just thinks I'm a lousy actor or the character is a louse. Whatever he thinks, I'm sure it's a little bit different from the guy he's sitting next to."

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It was five years later when I heard a chilling echo of Jake's guttural, raspy voice. I had published a novel which had had a modest success and a small but growing gay troupe of actors performing in a converted warehouse in West Chelsea had commissioned me to write a play for them. The four-character play I had created was all about wannabe actors caught up in the offstage dramas of their own lives. We had a modest turnout of actors for the auditions—even the strangest of casting calls always gets a crowd in Manhattan. So when a familiar-looking young man walked into the audition room and read lines with a casting director and his voice seared the air,

I reached for the photograph and flipped it over to the back and studied the resume. Zack, Jake's youngest son, was now nineteen and didn't have a single professional acting credit to his name. And though he was not quite as tall as his dad, nor as thuggish-looking (in part, because his scalp was covered with a mat of thick, black hair), he did possess his father's self-assurance and cocky attitude. The role he was best suited for had already been filled by one of the members of the acting troupe, but I was able to convince the director to use Zack as an understudy and launch him on a quest for bigger and better roles.

And though it would have made pure novelistic sense for me to bed Zack that day or during rehearsals or even during the short run of the play, it wasn't until three years later that I ran across him at a gym in the Village and we finally hooked up with each other in that manner. And now it would be too vulgar of me to compare the attributes of the father and the son: the voice, the arms, the chest, the size of their dicks, one against the other, kissing and telling who was a better lover—or even the better actor. But as Zack and I lay in each other's embrace in my apartment after we had both come and dried ourselves with a towel I kept nearby, I realized that I had reached the age Jake was when we first met and his son was the age I had been that year, too. "Never fall in love with an actor," I whispered to Zack that day, then added some advice I had learned the hard way, "And never stop telling him if you do."

Health

Laughter spilled out into the lobby. Inside the ballroom, someone blew a party horn, rap-tap-tap to the rhythm of a golden-oldies pop song. While Cliff waited, he looked at himself in the mirror that filled the walls by the bank of elevators. For the first time in eight years he actually filled out his tuxedo. He was no longer tall and gaunt. He had told Jesse that he had to pull his stomach in slightly in order to button the jacket and that next time he might even have to let out the waist. *Let out the waist*, he repeated to himself now with a laugh. Cliff smiled and moved into the ray of an overhead spotlight. He noticed his face was round and absent of wrinkles, his neck thick and pulpy as it tightened against his shirt collar and bow tie, so fleshy, in fact, he had to lean closer to the mirror in order to detect his Adam's apple. He pushed his hands into his pants pockets, shrugged his shoulders, drew in his cheeks and pouted, pretending he was a young model posing for a fashion layout. He felt silly but happy; here he was, an aging man acting like a kid. It was late and he still had lots of energy left. He looked away from his image when he noticed Jesse approaching.

"We can stay longer if you want," Cliff said.

"I've had enough," Jesse answered. He paused beside Cliff and struggled to get his hand through the sleeve of his overcoat.

Cliff helped him with the sleeve. They walked through the lobby, Jesse leading the way, Cliff bouncing at his heels like an animated puppy. Outside, in the sudden darkness of the sidewalk,

Cliff moved ahead of Jesse, out into the street to hail a cab. None available, he noticed, as he lifted his hand into the air. They waited a few minutes, Cliff shifting back and forth on his feet as if he were still dancing.

"Aren't you cold?" Jesse asked.

"Not really," Cliff answered. He wasn't wearing an overcoat. The cold air felt good. He inhaled deeply and watched his breath condense into white puffs in front of his eyes. Jesse pulled a pair of gloves out from the pockets of his coat. "Here," he said, and handed the gloves to Cliff. "At least put these on."

"Okay," Cliff said. "Let's try the subway."

They began walking downtown. At the next intersection they stopped and Cliff looked again for a cab. Still none available. The cold air and the darkness and the city lights made Cliff giddy. Everything suddenly seemed new and shiny again. *This is why I came here all those years ago*, he thought, *to be a part of this—this energy*. Jesse waited at the curb while Cliff looked out into the street.

At the next block they headed down into the subway. Jesse moved mechanically through the turnstile and then to the platform. Cliff rocked back and forth on the heels of his feet, his movements finding the patterns of a long-ago tap class. Shift-ball-change, shift-ball-change, rap-tap-tap, Cliff's feet went on the cement. Jesse didn't notice Cliff's movements. Cliff grabbed the side of a column and swung himself around like Gene Kelly would do in a musical. Jesse gave Cliff a weak smile and the two of them moved toward each other as if to kiss, but the sound of an approaching train made them pause.

When they took a seat, Cliff sensed Jesse relax. Jesse had been tense and stressed for the last month. It wasn't the holidays so much that affected Jesse's behavior; they had both learned to deal with those issues. It was the end-of-the-year business pressures that were eating at Jesse. Donations were down at the health-care organization where Jesse worked. The budget had been cut back. Jesse had

organized that evening's black tie benefit as a fundraiser. But costs had escalated. The hotel had upped its fee after the invitations had been printed and the advertising had started to appear. One performer canceled and another, more expensive one, had replaced her. Cliff knew that if they were lucky they might break even. He knew that Jesse believed that he had failed in his job, even though the benefit had received a good amount of media attention.

Cliff knew Jesse was worried. His job was on the line, even though no one could do better than Jesse was doing. When Cliff had first met Jesse, Jesse was working as a volunteer. Jesse worked a few hours a week as a buddy, visiting a homebound client who lived uptown. Cliff had quit a successful public relations career when he tested HIV-positive; he had taken a desk job with a home care service because he didn't want to stay home and die. Cliff had met Jesse at a fundraiser for an organization that provided services for positive people so many years ago that he had now lost track of the anniversary date.

Jesse had casually said that evening they met that he had wanted a different job. He wanted to move up in the organization, to be involved more than as a volunteer. He wanted to work on the fundraising events and day-to-day planning. Cliff had encouraged him to apply for a position; no one would turn him down if he thought he could help. A few weeks later, Jesse went to work for the agency that had evolved from a shoestring grassroots crisis center into a multimillion-dollar corporation fighting the rising epidemic. For a while Jesse was just another guy there who dialed you on the phone, reaching you when you sat down to eat or were watching the evening news, and asked you for a contribution or about a pledge or participation in such things as a dance-a-thon or walk-a-thon. Jesse learned the ropes quickly; he had a desire to succeed and a will to live. And he had an easy going manner that translated his good looks into a charming personality. Soon, Jesse was promoted and supervising many of the people he had started with at the corporation.

Not everyone at the corporation had Jesse's easy success. A lot of workers and volunteers had health problems. Most people could only work part-time or the days they could make it into the office. Some people showed up because the work offered them therapy. Others came as an outlet against grief. Turnover was great. Everyone wanted to help somehow even if they were frustrated by not knowing which direction they should go. Only a few were really good at raising money. Big money. Donations from other large corporations to aid the corporation with its worthy fight and mission. These were the men and women who worked with Jesse. They formed the core of the corporation's fundraising effort. They dressed up in corporate clothes and went out on appointments. But there were also workers and volunteers who couldn't get you to give the cause a penny.

The ones who couldn't cut it would eventually quit. No one was ever fired or asked to resign. Guilt would work its own magic. Sometimes, someone would burn out from working too hard. Or health would intercede, illness ironically disrupting the workplace of an organization formed to combat illness. Cliff knew that Jesse took all of these losses to heart. Jesse blamed himself for not training his workers better. And he blamed himself for not raising enough money so a cure could be found or to better fund the necessary research. Eventually he got over his guilt. There were too many losses not to get over another one.

On the subway, Cliff watched a couple standing opposite him move into a kiss. The guy and the girl were both young and well dressed, dark skinned with bright white smiles. Everyone seemed so young to Cliff now. Jesse's staff had become younger and younger over the years. The crisis had evolved even if the corporation no longer could change itself. Soon it seemed as if all of Jesse's workers and volunteers were new to the city. Guys who had arrived in town with a diploma and were looking for their first jobs. Young, handsome, high-strung, self-absorbed guys. There was always someone to take someone's place. The corporation had

reached a high profile. There was no end of workers and volunteers wanting to sign on. And if they weren't young and male and gay, then they were young and female or lesbian or part of another affected minority. Jesse always seemed to have an endless supply of young workers wanting to work with him.

At the benefit that evening Cliff had danced with Gordon, one of Jesse's younger staff members. Gordon was a Southern expatriate like Cliff, which had prompted an easy bond and a friendly conversation. Gordon was just out of college and learning his way around the city. Cliff was always glad to offer advice or survival tips when they spoke. At the benefit Cliff could not keep his eyes off of Gordon as they danced. Gordon was short and well built and still had a boyish look about him. He had danced with a giddiness that infected Cliff. They had fallen into a swing style of dancing when the song changed tempos to a big band sound. When the music was done, Gordon had hugged Cliff and kissed him briefly on the lips. "Why is it that all the great guys are taken?" Gordon said to Cliff. Cliff's eyes had widened and he smiled. Here he was, lucky to be alive decades into the epidemic, and someone still found him desirable.

Cliff thought about that hug and kiss again while riding the subway. Gordon had given him no reason to expect anything further. But there was something to Gordon that Jesse no longer possessed for Cliff. Jesse no longer made Cliff feel desirable. No longer made him feel happy and alive and healthy and needed. The truth was Cliff did not make Jesse feel desirable enough either. They had never agreed to be monogamous, but clues of Jesse's other affairs floated to the surface without much guilt from Jesse. Cliff had been unable to respond to Gordon's comment, as flabbergasted by its sentiment as its naïveté. Jesse had been notorious in recruiting lovers from his staff and Cliff had wondered if Gordon was anywhere on Jesse's soon-to-be-my-new-secret-boyfriend list. Cliff had spent years overhearing hushed phone conversations late at night or stories of fabricated meetings at the

last minute. At the back of Cliff's mind was the thought the he should leave Jesse since their relationship had become platonic. But there was a history of them together that Cliff was afraid to walk away from. And the truth, the sad truth, was that Cliff had always felt the epidemic had somehow left him damaged and undesirable. Cliff had always felt defeated by his health. Who else would want him even in the small, dishonest way that Jesse needed him now?

Jesse had always felt different. Testing positive had rejuvenated Jesse's life. Jesse had protested and demonstrated. He had gone to sex clubs and had himself pierced and tattooed. And it was Jesse who literally forced Cliff to survive when Cliff fell ill with pneumonia eight years ago. Jesse had showed up every morning in Cliff's hospital room and had set an order to the day. The truth was, Cliff knew at the core of his being, that he had survived because of Jesse. Cliff owed his health to Jesse.

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Sometimes Cliff said, quite sincerely, that he also owed his life to Max. Cliff and Jesse had been lovers for eight years; before that Jesse and Max were together for seven years. Max took care of Jesse when Jesse was hospitalized with pneumonia, nursed him back to health. Max had absorbed and rationalized the early days of the crisis and presented a model approach which Jesse could draw upon when Cliff became sick. Jesse had spent years asking about Cliff's doctors, checking his prescriptions, reading up on treatments, planning his health. But Max had never completely disappeared from the picture. It was Max who got Jesse the job as a fundraiser. Max had been at the corporation when Jesse was a volunteer. In the last decade, Max had worked there intermittently as he battled to maintain his own health. Now, his complexion was mottled from too many medications, giving him the dark, bloodless pigmentation of a corpse. A few years back, during his

angrier, more intense activist phase, Max had grown a goatee which he refused to shave for corporate appearances. Now, it grew in sparse, blotchy sections, like a stray dog's fur matted in the rain.

"I can't find Jesse," Max had said when he found Cliff in the men's room at the benefit that evening.

"I'm sure he's checking something out for the musicians," Cliff said.

Max walked into a stall and crumpled to the floor, his head bent over the toilet. He threw up with short gagging sounds. Cliff turned and listened to the retching. He knew Max had been fighting off gastrointestinal problems. He knew from Jesse that Max's cocktail of prescriptions wasn't working for him. But he had been surprised to notice Max earlier with a glass of champagne in his hand.

"This fucking medicine is like a fucking hairbrush in my stomach," Max said. Max had years ago worked as a hairdresser.

"Do you need a doctor?" Cliff asked. He was standing behind Max, staring at the soles of Max's black dress shoes to avoid looking at Max's pained expression.

Max declined, waving Cliff away and mumbling something or another about insurance. But he kept complaining, bellyaching, moaning, and breathing heavily on the floor. Then he said he thought he might be hemorrhaging internally.

"Should I get help?" Cliff asked.

"Just get the fuck out of here," Max replied.

Cliff walked away and washed his hands at the sink. He didn't leave Max alone. Soon Max turned morose. "This is it," he said, his fist pounding on the tile bathroom floor. "My time is up." Cliff was trying not to pay attention, trying to casually comb his hair, waiting for Max to admit that he needed help.

"What the fuck are you hanging around for?" Max asked when he had picked himself up off the floor and had stood at the sink next to Cliff.

"I'll take you to the doctor," Cliff said.

Max twisted the faucets, cupped the water in his hands and washed his face. Cliff offered him a handful of paper towels.

"I've got to talk to Jesse," Max said, irritably.

"He's working," Cliff said. "No telling where he is."

"He's always working," Max said. "If he's not working, he's working someone." Max threw the towels in the trash and Cliff's eyes followed the trajectory of the paper. "I want to tell him I'm quitting. I'm moving to California. I can't take this weather. I can't take this shit. I've got to get my health back."

"I'll tell him for you," Cliff said. "If you don't find him."

Max turned mean. "I want to tell him myself," he said.

"Then you can tell him tomorrow."

"This doesn't involve you," Max said. He was bracing his weight against the wings of the sink.

"Of course it does," Cliff said. "Do you need a doctor now?"

A bitterness rose to the surface of Max's expression. "Why don't you get your own life?" he said. "Stop butting into mine. I don't need your help."

Max was never one to keep his opinions to himself. Over the years, he had tried to give Cliff as much advice as he had given Jesse on everything from cutlery to meditation therapies. Cliff waited at the sink, expecting Max to now offer some other off-the-wall admonition, like why didn't Cliff go out and rent a new tuxedo instead of trying to fit into his faded, out-of-date old one. But nothing else was said. Instead, Max started to walk away before he turned back. "One day you're not going to be so lucky," he said.

"So I'll deal with it," Cliff said.

"You think just because you're so good looking you can get away with shit," he said. "You're not fooling me. You're nothing but a fucking faggot. Why are you still staying with him? You don't owe him anything. I care about him. He'll never mean to you what he means to me."

Max went out of the restroom with an ungraceful tug of the

doorknob. After a minute, Cliff opened the door and looked out into the hall. It was empty.

On the subway back to the apartment Jesse asked Cliff, "What happened to Max?"

Cliff simply said, "He was upset. He was drinking. He started in again about moving to California."

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Back at the apartment, Jesse tossed his jacket and shirt on the couch without hanging them up. His shoes ended up in the hall, the cuff links and bow tie made it to the top of the dresser in the bedroom.

Cliff lingered in the kitchen, his buoyancy fighting off a rising sense of melancholy. He poured himself a glass of juice and walked into the darkened living room. Jesse had done quite well with the health business. The loft they shared had a striking view of the city. Cliff looked at the buildings uptown, the windows lit and twinkling in the black air like stars in the sky. Eventually, as Cliff lifted his glass to finish his juice, he found his image reflected in the window. Such a long journey, he thought, to see himself healthy again.

Cliff finished his juice and washed the glass in the kitchen sink. On his way through the hall, Cliff stopped to pick up Jesse's tuxedo jacket and pants to hang up in the closet. As he was slipping the pants over a hanger, something fell out of the pocket onto the floor. Cliff stooped to pick it up. It was a small gold card, the kind usually attached to a present. Cliff flipped it open and read it. "Happy New Year. Love, Ray." Ray must be Jesse's latest boyfriend, Cliff thought.

At the party, Cliff had seen Jesse across the room, seated at a banquette with another guy, a thin, young-looking man with a short, military haircut and an Adam's apple too large for his neck. Across the room they looked like two children, Jesse whispering madly and the other guy with his head bent down to listen.

Something about the inclination of Jesse's head had revealed a big, wide, embarrassed grin on his face. They were seated side by side, kneecap to kneecap, a small box on Jesse's lap, a privacy so hushed between them that it obliterated anything else in the room. Cliff, remembering that scene, could only move to the next logical point. Jesse had tilted his head back and the two of them had slipped into a kiss.

It wasn't a brotherly kiss of thanks, or a sincere greeting, or even a friendly peck on the cheek. It was the lustful kiss of two lovers who desired to be somewhere else at that moment than where they were caught. Cliff had watched as their mouths opened to each other, the air rushed in and out, a tongue grazed against a lip and then a final, deeply felt coupling.

Cliff had been more embarrassed by the outward display of emotion than of the fact that the affection emanated from Jesse. He turned and headed out of the ballroom and into the restroom where he splashed his face with warm water and studied himself in the mirror, which was when Max had arrived.

Now, back at the apartment, Cliff washed his face again and brushed his teeth, regarding his body as if he expected it to be bruised like a piece of fruit that had tumbled to the ground. Nothing was different. His body only served as a shell for his mind, he thought. The veins of his forearms were thick and ropy from medication. Shirtless, he studied the paunch at the end of his stomach, tapped it gingerly as if he expected it to deflate like a soufflé. Cliff's medication had restored his health and created fatty deposits at his stomach and on his back. Cliff turned sideways and studied his torso in the mirror. For a moment, before he straightened his posture, he had a vision of himself as an elderly man. Now, staring at his body, he convinced himself that the hunch wasn't too noticeable. His doctor had said his body was unable to metabolize fat. He had high levels of cholesterol in his blood. His risk of heart attack was greater. *Greater than what*? Cliff had thought when he had heard that line. He was expected to have

been dead years ago. Wasn't it a trade-off anyway? Here he was, expected to be dead long ago and instead feeling like a boy who had been kissed for the first time. It didn't make any sense.

Jesse was in bed asleep, turned on his side, facing away from Cliff's side of the bed. Cliff sat on the edge of the bed and noticed the dust on the side of the lamp shade. Beside him Jesse did not stir. In the distance he heard a siren moving on the street below and Cliff got out of bed and went to the window. Again he caught his reflection. He smiled at himself, summoning one more time Gordon's brief kiss. Cliff had left the restroom at the benefit after Max had disappeared and he wandered to the dance floor where he had talked and danced with Gordon. Gordon's kiss had lifted him out of his funk, had made him feel alive instead of just being a witness to someone else's life. Now, Cliff's memory sifted through a history of kisses, wondering what Gordon's might have been like if it had lingered more. Would he have opened his lips and lightly bitten Cliff's bottom lip as they matched their breathing to each other? Or would he have allowed Cliff to slide his tongue into his mouth, slipping it around his teeth and tongue in search of the back of his throat? His nose tingled at the memory of Gordon's cologne. Cliff felt a rise in himself. This is what lies between us, he thought, not health or the fear of losing it. This is what lies between us, he decided, the desire to be somewhere other than where we were now. The desire to keep living. To feel alive. He knew it was time for a change, even though he was reluctant—no, *worried*—about disrupting his status quo.

He left the window and walked out of the room and into the kitchen. He picked up the phone and dialed a number.

I've never been to California, Cliff thought, while he waited for an answer on the other end. He wanted things to feel new again. Things could be different in California, he decided. California could be something new for him, too.

Someone Like You

At thirty-six Tom thought it was time to be more serious about his personal life, though it wasn't until three years later when he woke up one morning and felt the twang of a tendon above his kneecap, the ache of an upper molar that would need a root canal, and a heavy sinus headache from the one beer he had drank the night before that he felt something should change. It wasn't his physical decline that created this idea, however. Tom felt another decision was imminent. For more than seven months he had been dating two guys at the same time and sooner or later he would need to choose one to stick with. Peter was forty-eight, six inches taller than Tom, had a lanky, runner's build, and was HIV-positive, which Tom felt accounted for Peter's rather flushed and reddened complexion. Dylan was eleven years younger than Tom and sero-negative, with a strong, swarthy jawline and a stocky, hairy physique. Tom's dates with Peter were always calendared and planned: dinner out at a good restaurant and followed by a movie, drinks at a new bar before going to a comedy club, a holiday weekend trip upstate antiquing with them staying at a recommended B-and-B. Dylan was more spontaneous, calling Tom on his cellphone from the corner and saying, "I'm on your block. Wanna get together to do something?"

Two boyfriends meant that Tom now kept his apartment clean, a bottle of wine chilling in his refrigerator, and a landline and cellphone with caller ID. Obsessively, he kept his hair cut, his

teeth brushed, his breath fresh, and his night stand drawer full of condoms and an extra bottle of lubricant. On the days before he got together with Peter, he would shave and groom his body so that any nicks or scratches would have time to heal. For Dylan, he spent an extra ten minutes at the gym working on his stomach. Dylan might be a beefy and bearish sort of guy but he appreciated that Tom was not.

Tom's physical decline continued in the form of spasms: a nervous twitch of his eyelid, an anxious twinge in his rectum, panicky butterflies in his stomach. While Tom appreciated and enjoyed dating two men at the same time, he had long ago realized that he was a serial dater—a one-man-at-a-time sort of guy. Two guys at once was not too ethical to his conscience. Whenever he spent time with one of his two boyfriends there was a moment of guilt over his belief that he was deceiving the other one. Peter did not know about Dylan and vice versa, and while Dylan might be cool to the notion that Tom was dating another guy—Dylan was always telling Tom about a recent trick he had hooked up with online—Peter would have been heartbroken and discouraged. Peter had long ago left behind his tomcatting days; he wanted to settle down in a relationship and live together with a guy. Dylan only wanted a security blanket, a lover without any jealous demands.

To compensate for all this, when Tom was alone he meditated, stretched his body as he had learned to do in a yoga class, and listened to new age Celtic music. Sometimes he even lit a scented candle. He also confided in Suzanne, his co-worker at the law firm where they were both securities attorneys. Suzanne was a tough, shrewd business woman and a terror to her staff. But she had a pretty face—dark eyes and dark hair—and a pearish body, more thighs and rump than breasts and cleavage, which she kept camouflaged with dark, tailored business suits. In turn, Suzanne confided in Tom about her own dates set up through an online dating service, one guy after the next who was a "loser," "dork," or "jerk" and who often knew nothing of her reputation in the office

but could tell that there was something a bit too off-putting or aggressive or disquieting about her personality.

"Why can't I meet someone like you?" she would ask Tom when they sat together for lunch.

"Like me?"

"The straight version of you."

"There's no such thing as a straight version of me."

"Okay. Someone conflicted. Like you. Someone who has a Dylan and a Peter."

"You want a straight boyfriend who dates two guys at a time?"

"As long as he's conflicted about it," Suzanne said. "That would at least mean he has a conscience."

Suzanne was in her late thirties and Tom often heard her biological clock ticking. He enjoyed telling her what he had done with Dylan the night before or what his plans were for the week ahead with Peter. He never asked Suzanne for advice, though he always enjoyed witnessing her reactions of his narrow escapes if Dylan had called while he was seeing Peter, or if Peter phoned while he was having sex with Dylan.

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"You'll never guess where I am," Dylan said when he called Tom at his apartment on Sunday night.

"Some kind of party," Tom replied. In the background Tom heard loud dance music, a techno thump and a wailing soprano's voice. Dylan wrote about the city nightlife circuit for several gay magazines and newspapers; he was always covering a book launch or a film preview or a drag act at a bar. Sometimes Tom went with Dylan to a theater opening or a cabaret performance at a nightclub because Dylan did not like going alone, the invitation usually arriving at the last minute, as if Dylan had just gotten the assignment himself. Other times Dylan stopped by Tom's

apartment for a late night visit on his way home from a dance club or an after-party. They would chat for a moment at Tom's kitchen table, sometimes sharing a beer or having a glass of wine, then suddenly stop talking and begin to grope each other. Tom never considered these stopovers as real dates, though he didn't complain about them either because he felt Dylan was the best sex partner he had ever had. Dylan enjoyed being versatile, an eager bottom or a willing top, whatever Tom was in the mood for. In bed, Dylan never failed to make Tom feel desirable, masculine and yet vulnerable, empty of neediness and full of yearning.

"Ship of fools," Dylan said, with a laugh crackling through the static of his cellphone. "A boat full of porn stars. We're all circling the island, trying not to look seasick."

"Any autographs?"

"Honey, there's a line for the toilet," Dylan said. "Some tired old queen's locked herself in there with some shirtless hunk and won't come out."

"Be sure to get details," Tom laughed. He enjoyed hearing Dylan's stories from his parties, and he loved reading how Dylan converted or disguised the gossipy details for his columns. Oddly, Tom was never jealous whenever Dylan wrote about "locking himself in the toilet with so-and-so" or "last night I was out with a trick from last week." Sometimes it gave Tom a little thrill to discover himself as Dylan's "BF"—or "BoyFriend" in print: "Last night the BF and I went to the opera," Dylan might write about their trip to the Met. Or "enough parties this week—I just want to spend the next three nights in bed with my BF."

"One of your favorites is here," Dylan said.

"Who?" Tom asked, his left eyelid suddenly twitching. Sometimes during sex Tom and Dylan watched DVDs together—porn that Dylan also reviewed under a pseudonym—and they were always commenting about the particular attributes or physical features they liked about one star or another.

"Red hair. Big arms. Tats. Know who I'm talking about?"

"Yep. How does he look?"

"Hotter than hell," Dylan said. "Made me think of you."

"No way," Tom answered, playing along and feeling aroused.

"Made me think of how good the two of you would look together in bed. His arms on your butt."

"And where would you be?" Tom asked, a twinge rattling through his rectal muscles.

"Enjoying you both," Dylan said. "Maybe I'll bring him over later."

"I bet we could all have a good time together."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Not as much as you would, I bet."

"Maybe I shouldn't." Dylan said, his voice sounding faint and earnest.

"Why not?" Tom asked loudly, raising his voice as if their connection was about to fail at any second.

"I enjoy having you to myself too much. I don't want to share you."

Butterflies fluttered through Tom's stomach as he thought of Peter. "Don't tell me you're getting serious," he said to Dylan with a light-hearted, mocking tone.

"I know a good thing when I see it," Dylan said. "And I know how good it is when I get it from you."

❍

Though his life was complex, Tom tried his best to keep it compartmentalized. Work was work and his personal life was personal. The only overlap was Suzanne. Together, they celebrated birthdays, work anniversaries, and an occasional bonus, raise, or holiday. At home, Tom told Dylan and Peter that Suzanne was like his office wife; he kept no secrets from her. She knew all about Dylan—or Peter—depending on with whom he was spending time. In truth, Tom knew he spoke a little too much about his

boyfriends with Suzanne and a little too much about Suzanne with his two boyfriends. Some days he felt that this made him a bit less than perfect boyfriend and co-worker. Neither a good catch nor a good employee. What he had become was a good gossiper.

This fault made him think of his other faults: his crooked bottom teeth, his thinning hair, his often gassy stomach. Sometimes he wore the same suit, shirt, and tie two or three days running, too bored and lazy to try to match another shirt with a different tie. At work, he had a list of vendors he liked and disliked using, and often found himself annoyed at having to double-check Suzanne's work. She had a good grasp of concepts and theories and how to interpret the law, yet little skill at managing the details of checking dates, adding numbers, or even using the proper grammar.

At lunch on Tuesday, Suzanne unloaded a weepy tale about her blind date the night before with an overweight man who did not ask her anything about herself. "He talked about the Yankees," she said. "How they had bungled their lead in the last inning. I sat there the whole time thinking why can't I meet a guy who wants to have a glass a wine at the MoMA café?"

"A straight man?" Tom asked.

"I'd settle for a breathing one."

Tom was also sensitive about playing too affirmatively into Suzanne's ideal of a perfect boyfriend or even assuming the role of a substitute. Of course, he would love to spend a day at the museum with Suzanne and then drink a glass of wine at a café. But Tom's own past history of women with ideas of who he might be for them haunted him. His best friend in high school, a funny, highly strung girl named Melissa, had attempted suicide when Tom refused to profess love for her and he told her he thought he might be gay. Since then, Tom had been cautious of being too friendly with women, though he was always aware he had never had the special kind of bond with a man (gay, straight, or otherwise) as he had had with his close female friends.

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After work on Wednesday, Tom met Peter at a supermarket. Peter had a recipe and a list of items he needed in order to cook dinner at Tom's apartment.

"Do you have a garlic press?" he asked Tom.

"Of course not," Tom answered with a good-natured laugh, but felt his eyelid twitch. He seldom cooked in his apartment. He'd only gotten a salad spinner and a pasta strainer since dating Peter. Tom and Peter seldom spent time at Peter's small studio because it felt like being inside a closet. Peter loved the fact that at Tom's four room railroad-car apartment he could be cooking in the kitchen and not even hear Tom watching television in the bedroom.

"We should probably get a grater, too," Peter said. "Do I dare ask you if we have a grater, too?"

"Greater than what?" Tom answered, proud of his pun even though he felt a shudder of guilt move through his rectum as he thought of Dylan.

Peter liked talking as the collective units of "We." Peter worked as a manager of a photographic studio downtown. He loved reminding Tom about how his job had evolved, from chemicals and darkened labs to computers and disks. "Think of all the things we are seeing changing in our lifetimes," Peter said. "Faxes, e-mail, DVDs." It made Tom think of how lucky Peter was to be alive, to see in their lifetimes how a virus might morph from a death knell to a manageable disease.

Back at his apartment, Peter unloaded the groceries while Tom checked his answering machine. After listening to a solicitation for "three free nights at Disneyland," Tom discretely unplugged the phone so he would not be disturbed while spending the evening with Peter. Not that he expected Dylan to call, but in case he did, or in case Suzanne, weepy and weary from another bad date, decided not to wait until the next day at work to share her misery. Sometimes Suzanne called just to rehash their stress in the office with a client or their boss (an aging partner who still believed he was in the military) as much as to reiterate the misery of her most

recent bad dates. There was no need to aggravate Peter. Peter could often be jealous over what he did not know of Tom's life and a long, placating phone conversation with Suzanne would give Peter the exact kind of cause Tom was hoping to avoid.

"Put on some music," Peter said from the kitchen. Peter and Tom had fallen into a habit of seeing each other twice a week. On Tuesday or Wednesday night and again on Saturday night. Tom was lucky that Dylan seldom liked to spend Saturday night together because it was the best night of the week to go to a club and dance, or so Dylan said, which in Tom's version translated into the pickings and tricking were best on the weekend when there was no real need for an occasional BF. Tom couldn't fault Dylan for this. He'd been just like him when he was Dylan's age.

Once, Tom had seen Dylan and Peter back to back on a late Saturday afternoon when Dylan was passing through the neighborhood and before Peter had shown up at the apartment before they went out to a new restaurant. The close call had delighted Suzanne when Tom had told it to her the following week.

"The lube was out and the porn was still playing when Peter buzzed," Tom told her. "I had just stepped out of the shower and had forgotten I hadn't cleaned up. Luckily, Peter opened a bottle of wine and I had enough time to get rid of all the incriminating evidence from Dylan."

In the kitchen Peter came behind Tom and squeezed him, his arms embracing Tom's waist and his flushed face nuzzling against Tom's neck. Peter loved being romantic; he often brought Tom flowers or wine or a CD he thought Tom might enjoy. Sometimes Tom loved feeling trapped in Peter's world, a shiny object of affection coated with heat and cologne. Peter never wanted to rush right into sex; he preferred to hug or nuzzle or cuddle. Sometimes he gave Tom backrubs or a slow massage that ended in a release (and that Tom was not expected to reciprocate). Sex was never Peter's real objective and Tom, in fact, was relieved when it did not

happen. Tom was always conscious of body fluids and the items they shared when Peter was with him or staying at his apartment, perhaps because Peter was always so conscious of the next pill he needed to take. He traveled with a week's supply of his HIV medications in his knapsack, not about to let a terrorist attack or an Act of God send him off schedule. Tom always changed the sheets and threw the damp towels in the dirty clothes hamper right after Peter left in the mornings. At the back of his mind was the idea that no matter how safe they were together, there was still the possibility of a slip-up and Tom could become infected.

"You're going to love this dish," Peter said, as they unraveled and Peter addressed an item that was cooking in the skillet on Tom's stove. "It's full of garlic. I love it when we stay in and do these sorts of things together."

Tom smiled and now it was his turn to embrace Peter and revel in the warm, delicious odor of cooking garlic. He knew Peter was testing the waters. Love wasn't the smell of garlic or the size of Tom's apartment or keeping their sex life a little too safe to even call it sex *together*. Sooner or later love was going to land against his skin, ring in his ears, and try to settle into his chest. It happened after dinner, when they had settled into Tom's bed and were watching a DVD Peter had brought, a film made in England with English actors pretending to live and work in an English country estate. Peter fell asleep before the movie was over, though Tom enjoyed watching the plot unfold. When the deception was uncovered—an actor pretending to be a servant but really the son of the wealthy landowner—Tom felt the familiar twinge of his eyelid, which he took, now, not as being from guilt over deceiving both of his boyfriends but from exhaustion and a desire to fall asleep. Dylan seldom spent the night with Tom, preferring his own bed and his own space. Peter loved to sleep over at Tom's apartment, their bodies entwined, his long slender body encircling Tom. Peter stirred when Tom turned off the TV and the room floated into darkness.

"I love you," Peter whispered.

Tom responded with a kiss, butterflies startling across his stomach.

❍

Eight years ago Suzanne's husband was killed in a motor cycle accident on Long Island. Pregnant, she carried their baby to term, but the boy died in the delivery room, strangled by the umbilical cord during a long, complicated labor. Suzanne sued both the physician and the hospital and was awarded a large settlement, which was money she added to the payout of her husband's life insurance, but the year she took off from working did little to ease her sorrow and she felt the best thing she could do was return to the workforce. Six years ago she moved to Manhattan and began her employment search, hardened and toughened and ready for a corporate job, starting as a new attorney at the firm at about the same time Tom was changing jobs.

Tom, at the tail end of an affair with a married man (and another attorney who refused to divorce his wife and move in with Tom), was the one who urged her to start dating again, to keep herself focused on her work and distracted from her grief. At the time, Tom was bouncing between tricks and first dates and possible pick-ups on the rebound from his married attorney ex-boyfriend. Suzanne had met her losers, dorks, and jerks through dating clubs, singles nights, support groups, and Catholic and Jewish matchmakers (though she was neither Catholic or Jewish; raised a Methodist, she no longer went to church, but had found her way into both dating circles courtesy of a friend-of-a-friend). She had never "given up the hunt," as she like to call her great dating quest, though she was savvy enough not to expect anything more than a few minutes of boredom over a cup of coffee, or a last-minute proposition for a quickie if the guy had liked her enough to want to have sex (and which she always refused, or so she told Tom).

Peter and Stuart had been lovers for nine years. They had both been diagnosed as positive at about the same time, but it had been Stuart who was the first to get sick. Stuart's decline had lasted several years; there were several months of disability and numerous trips to the hospital. Stuart had not responded well when the new cocktail medications became available and, after his death, Peter had resisted the temptation to find a new lover quickly. There were three years of abstinence between Stuart's death and Peter's meeting Tom in the locker room of a gym on Eighth Avenue.

Dylan had never had a lover before, though he had fallen in love with the first guy he slept with after coming out in high school in Florida. Mike was still his closest friend—they had moved to New York together and shared a studio apartment in the West Village. When Dylan wasn't writing about going to the theater with his BF, he was usually writing about his BF (Best Friend) Mike. Mike was thin and blond and often in competition with Dylan with scoring a trick. Tom had slept with Mike first before he had had sex with Dylan. Mike had been Suzanne's temporary assistant for a day, and had given her the nickname "Dragon Lady" because she had made him retype a contract more than sixteen times in the space of two hours. Tom had run into Mike the week following his abrupt dismissal during happy hour at a gay bar on the Upper East Side. Tom had bought Mike a beer before bringing him back to his apartment. He met Dylan on a second date with Mike. It was Dylan who called first, to ask Tom to get together, after Mike had decided to pursue dating another guy who was younger than Tom.

❍

Sometimes, Tom told Suzanne, he wished he could have the best of both boyfriends: Dylan's sexuality and Peter's domesticity, Dylan's spontaneity and Peter's romanticism. The morning after

Peter said "I love you," Suzanne insisted at lunch that Tom tell Peter about Dylan. And vice versa. "You're playing with fire," she said. "Someone's going to get burned. And I'd hate to see you go up in flames."

"I know I should choose," Tom said. "But what if I pick the wrong one?"

After lunch, the fire ignited by itself. Spontaneous combustion. Dylan phoned Tom at the office. "I tried calling you last night," Dylan said. "All I got was the answering machine. Where were you?"

"I was out of town," Tom lied. "Suzanne and I had to go to Washington. FCC meetings for a client. I came back this morning."

"Want a visitor?"

"Sure. When will I see you?"

"In about fifteen minutes."

"*Here? At the office?*" Tom said, his voice rising nervously a pitch higher. Dylan had never been to Tom's office. (Nor, for that fact, had Peter.)

"You're not ashamed to show me off, are you?" Dylan answered.

Tom's sexuality was known and accepted by his co-workers, but other than what he shared with Suzanne, the details of his romantic and sexual life were kept private and confidential and certainly out of the workplace and (he hoped) out of the office gossip.

"Of course not," Tom answered.

"Good," Dylan said. "I thought it was time I met the Dragon Lady in your life."

Fifteen minutes later, Dylan appeared at Tom's office, just enough time for Tom to prep Suzanne on why they were in Washington the day before and not in the office or at their apartments last night, and that Dylan, in fact, was a friend of Mike's, her former temporary assistant who had given her an unpleasant nickname. Suzanne was wounded, not by the nickname

but by the fact that Tom had never told her about sleeping with Mike and how he had *really* met Dylan, and she told him so, which set up the tension for the forthcoming introductions. When Dylan entered Tom's office, he introduced Dylan to Suzanne, and Dylan said, "Glad to meet you. I've heard all about you."

Tom confided in both Dylan and Peter about Suzanne's horror stories of dating, as if reminding both boyfriends, as well as himself, what they could expect to face if they let each other go—blistering, bad dates with men who were dysfunctional and without scruples. Dylan linked Suzanne's inability to find a boyfriend to her inability to keep Mike as her assistant. Tom had never brought up with his boyfriends Suzanne's personal trail of sorrow, though sometimes Tom talked about Suzanne and her miserable dates when Dylan talked too much about the fabulousness of his anonymous tricks, as if by changing the subject away from Dylan, they also might change the subject away from being exclusively about sex.

Suzanne scowled and reddened, as if she were Tom's other lover and knew exactly the kind of dysfunctional and scrupleless man Dylan was, and said, "Glad to finally meet you too." They shook hands as if they were about to step into opposite corners of a ring and begin to fight. Luckily, Suzanne's corner was in another office and she retreated, banging the door shut on her way out of Tom's office.

"And what do I owe this pleasure of your visit?" Tom asked. He was seated at his desk. Dylan was still standing where he had greeted Suzanne. He was dressed in a black T-shirt, black jeans, black sneakers, a black stubble on his jaw, inappropriate attire for an office visit, and Tom, in fact, *was* embarrassed at Dylan's appearance. He looked like a messenger boy eager to make an extra buck with a blow job. Tom was dressed in a suit, as he was most days in the office.

"Are you sleeping with her?" Dylan asked.

"Of course not," Tom answered. "Why do you even ask? I've never slept with a woman."

"You weren't home last night. I tried and tried."

"We were in Washington."

"She seems very protective of you."

"She works with me. I work with her. It's called teamwork."

"Let me see your eyes," Dylan said.

Their eyes locked and Tom hoped that Dylan would see the truth in that fact, that he was not sleeping with Suzanne, and not notice the twinge of his eyelid because he was thinking that moment of Peter.

"I've been thinking about you," Dylan said, a bit more relaxed, as if he had discovered some kind of truth behind Tom's eyes. "I wanted to see you. There's a lot I don't really know about you. I realized that I had never seen your office."

"Not much to report about," Tom laughed. "It's an office with a desk and a computer, too many books, and a view of the next building, like most in the city."

Dylan walked to the windows and looked at the next building. "Do you ever see anything going on? Office romances?"

"Over there? Of course not. I'm too busy over here to look to see what's happening somewhere else."

"I'm not keeping you from something, am I?"

"I've got a few minutes," Tom said. "It's good to see you, though I wish we were somewhere else and not in my office."

"I don't know. It's kind of hot to me. Seeing you all dressed up. Working. You ever have an office romance?"

"You've been watching too much porn."

"No, I mean it. Ever had an office romance? Sex in your office?"

"No," Tom answered. "Of course not. And it's not appropriate to start."

"Come on," Dylan said, suddenly standing beside Tom's chair. "I came all this way just for you."

"You said you were in the neighborhood," Tom answered, but just as he said this, Dylan dropped to his knees in front of Tom's

chair, as if he were about to ask Tom to marry him. "I thought you wanted to *see* me."

"I *do* want to *see* you," Dylan said, his hand reaching out and kneading Tom's crotch. "I *love* seeing you. I *love* getting you all hot and bothered. It means you care about me."

The blow job lasted five minutes. There was a fierce aggressiveness behind Dylan's technique which made Tom feel both powerless and extraordinary.

On his way out, Dylan stopped by Suzanne's office to say goodbye and she gave him a weak, disgusted smile, as if she already knew what Tom would eventually tell her.

Tom escorted Dylan to the elevator and the lobby of the building. "Now you won't forget me," Dylan said. "I'm the one you'll think about in your office."

❍

Tom, in fact, thought about Dylan when he returned to his office. He felt both disgusted and proud. A good catch and a bad boy. He thought so much about Dylan that he could not help thinking about Peter. And the more he thought about the both of them, the more his head began to hurt. First, above his twitching eyelid. Then the ache stretched across his forehead and rested behind his left ear, a bright burning spot that grew and tightened the muscle below his shoulder blade.

He left his desk and lay down on the small sofa in his office, closing his eyes and slowing his breathing as he did when he meditated, but the ache brightened beneath his eyelids and the pain moved from below his left shoulder blade to the center of his back. When it began to blaze and burn down his spinal cord, Tom decided to get up and take a taxi home.

In the taxi, he felt relieved to be out of the office and the ride across town to his apartment eased him, in spite of the traffic and the workday congestion.

Upstairs, in his apartment and lying down on his bed, he fell into a deep sleep—he felt unusually exhausted because of the energy the pain had consumed and the tension Dylan had created and released while in his office. When he woke four hours later, the pain was back, this time burning in his stomach and flushing up into his chest. In his sleep Tom had started to sweat, and his forehead and underarms were soaked with perspiration. He coughed, remembering reading somewhere that it might jump start his circulation if a heart attack was imminent.

The pain continued, burning in his chest. He decided to call Peter first. Peter would know what to do about the pain. He was always full of common sense when it came to aches and pains of the body; he knew about antidotes and alternative therapies and homeopathic remedies. He'd be able to quickly assess what was happening, make a recommendation, and offer the appropriate concern.

Tom looked at his clock and wasn't sure if Peter would still be at work. He dialed the photographic studio, but Peter was not there, his voicemail picking up after the fourth ring. Next Tom tried Peter's home number and then his cellphone, leaving urgent messages to return the call as soon as possible.

He waited thirty minutes, till the pain was brighter and harder and making it more difficult to breathe. He tried calling Dylan on his cellphone. When there was no answer he left a message, then left another message on Dylan's home answering machine. Dylan might not know what to do, but Tom thought Dylan's voice might simply offer some kind of calm and reassurance.

After fifteen more minutes and a growing tightness at his chest, Tom became frightened. Neither boyfriend was around when he was desperately needed. Tom was adrift in pain, caught in the burning tower of his body. He'd always thought it would be work that would do him in. Not a boyfriend. Or two of them.

It was Suzanne who came to his rescue, doing what neither of his boyfriends could do—getting Tom's spare keys out of his desk

drawer, taking a taxi across town to check on him, climbing the stairs of his apartment, finding him sweating in bed, and calling an ambulance to take him to the hospital.

"I promise I'll make this up to you somehow," Tom said to Suzanne as he was carried down the stairs of his building and into an ambulance. He was grateful he was not alone, that someone was around to go through the next steps with him.

"Stop worrying," Suzanne answered firmly. "Or I might hold you to your promise. Then you'll be sorry you ever called me for help."

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At the hospital, Tom was given blood thinners and admitted for observations and tests. A cardiologist was consulted. Tom was under too much stress. The possibility of open heart surgery was discussed. Another procedure for clearing his veins was considered. Suzanne stayed with Tom in his room or waited with him for results, helping him to ease his fears. Her work from the office was sent over by messenger. She only used her cellphone in the hallway by the nurse's station.

Tom thought a lot about Suzanne. If he could love her. If he weren't gay. How he would make this up to her. How he could not live without her in his life. Her toughness disappeared, replaced by a motherly, or sisterly, concern. Tom felt that she deserved to find a good man, that, in fact, she truly deserved someone better than him. She deserved a *truly* good man, not someone who could date two men at the same time. If he wasn't good enough himself for her, then he would make a stronger effort to help her find someone who was.

The following day both boyfriends called Tom.

"What are you doing in the hospital?" Dylan asked.

"Tests," Tom said. "I needed a test. Where were you? I tried calling."

"Are you okay?" Dylan asked, avoiding Tom's last question.

"Better. But I'll be here for a few days. Will I see you?"

"I can't come by today. I'm on deadline and I promised to take Mike to a screening tonight."

"Can't break your promises, can you?"

"I'll visit you tomorrow," Dylan said. "Promise. Do you want a visitor tomorrow?"

"Ask me tomorrow," Tom answered and hung up.

"I can't do this," Peter said, when he called. "I can't visit you. Ever since Stuart died, I get panicky when I think about a hospital. It makes me too worried about myself. I have to think about my own health. I'm stressing out just thinking of visiting you. My herpes is back."

"I wouldn't want to be the cause of anything that made you sick," Tom said.

"When will you be out?"

"Ask me tomorrow," Tom answered and hung up.

When Suzanne arrived at the hospital with work, he told her about both calls. She nodded and said true colors were often displayed in times of a crisis.

"You're too good to me," Tom said. "Why don't you have a boyfriend? Why aren't you married to someone?"

"I'm working on it," she answered. "I have five dates pending."

"What? How did this happen? Why didn't I know this?"

"I didn't want to say anything, because I thought I might turn out to be a big loser myself, and you were too self-focused about your boyfriends and it didn't seem right to tell you about my plan after Dylan showed up at the office."

"Where did you meet these guys? And *five*? How did you ever meet five guys to date?"

"Speed dating," she said. "The less they know of you, the more they want to see you."

❍

Surgery was not performed, though Tom was released from the hospital with a pad of prescriptions he needed to fill and take on a daily basis.

Dylan did not visit Tom at the hospital and stopped writing about Tom in his weekly column. Peter called again and apologized, but avoided visiting Tom because of his herpes outbreak, then simply stopped calling and faded away into Tom's list of ex-boyfriends. At lunch, Suzanne began to talk about two of the five men she was interested in becoming more serious about. Will, a psychiatrist, who was a little too interested in getting inside her head, and Vic, a construction worker who was the best sex of her life.

Later, months later, well on the road of recovery and spending way too much time working on work, Tom took Suzanne's advice and went to a speed dating night at the gay community center in the West Village. "One desperate guy after the next," he laughed and told her the next day at lunch, about the men he had met for all of two minutes the night before. "Why can't I meet a guy like you?"

"Like me?" she answered. "What do you mean?"

"Someone like you. But gay. The gay version of you. A gay man who cares a little more than expected."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Why would you ever want someone with a hardened heart?"

Still Dancing

The class begins at eight; the room looks remarkably like a miniaturized version of the cafeteria where my high school in Georgia held its sock hops. I am always amazed at the people who take this class on a Saturday night, a beginner's introduction to country-western two-step dancing sponsored by a social group of expatriate Southern gays and lesbians in the New York City area. The men and women are wildly diverse tonight: ponytails, buzz cuts, tattoos, and earrings. If anything is predominant, it would have to be denim.

The instructor is named Lori, a tall, handsome woman who in different clothing could pass as one of Chekhov's sisters, but tonight is wearing jeans and a sleeveless plaid blouse, her blonde hair twisted into a braid that hangs down her back. She assembles everyone into the center of the room, there are about fifty of us now, and she shows us the basic step—a rhythm of shuffling the feet back and forth in a quick-quick, slow, slow pattern. We spread out and try the steps alone, but I feel so oddly exposed dancing by myself that I concentrate, perhaps too seriously, on my steps. Beside me a beefy guy with a goatee hooks his thumbs through the belt loops of his jeans and casually sashays through the steps as Lori repeats over and over, "Quick-quick, slow, slow. Quick-quick, slow, slow." I admire the way he makes it look so effortless.

Next we form a large circle and Lori explains that two-step dancing follows a circular, counterclockwise motion around the

room. A short black woman with huge, expressive eyes helps Lori demonstrate the dancing we will be learning, and then we are paired up into couples. My partner is a lesbian named Judy, and Lori informs us that we must make a decision within our couples as to who will lead and who will follow. (In Fred Astaire ballroom lingo that means someone must dance the boy's part and someone must dance the girl's part.) Judy says succinctly, but nicely, that she would like to lead, and though I squirm a bit, I know it is just my male-chauvinistic reactionary act; I actually want her to lead, so far every dance lesson I've had I have been the leader and tonight I want to practice following.

Lori gives out more pointers: where to place the hands, how to keep the steps going in different directions, how to weave around the other couples. Before you know it a Bonnie Raitt tune is pumped timidly through the loudspeakers and Judy, amazingly agile, leads me steadily in a dance around the room. Next thing I know Lori is teaching the leaders how to twirl the followers and as Judy and I work our way through the motions I have this silly thought racing through my head: this is a girl who likes girls who's dancing like a boy with a boy who likes boys dancing like a girl. When we stop I pitch my eyes toward the floor, unable to control my smiling.

I am here tonight for several reasons: trying to conquer my shyness and to escape some frustrations—bills, solitude, the news of another friend who just died. My friend Jack who now lives in California told me he goes two-stepping and has a great time. "Forget cruising," he said, when he first recommended I give this a try. "This is better than disco was in the seventies. And you get to touch someone while dancing." Jack gave up on the city about a year ago when Con Ed workers accidentally cut off the gas and water lines to his apartment building in Chelsea, or so he said, though I know it was more about missing his lover Chris, who had died the year before. Chris's advice when all this shit began hitting the fan so many years ago was to "keep moving"—keep

doing something so that the depression of what was happening didn't overwhelm you. I knew Chris before I knew Jack. Chris went from thirty-three to seventy-three in the space of a year. I don't blame Jack for wanting to leave after that. I miss them both, in equal, disturbing ways, like a boy lost at an amusement park who can't find his family and doesn't understand why they are not where they should be.

Time has erased my own boyish edge. I am single and now in my late thirties and a bit heavier than I would ever publicly admit, but I'm not at the dance tonight to try to meet anyone; still, there are several men here who intrigue me: the sandy-haired man I recognize from a television commercial, the lanky brunet who reminds me of an old boyfriend, and the guy behind a table of refreshments who I will study all night—fair and hunky, dark eyes, great arms, a balding patch at his forehead. I watch their eyes, trying to see what they see in the room—looking for clues to keep myself engaged and cheerful.

Though I mastered the basic dance steps a few months ago, I still take the class to practice; I also find it's a way to break the ice with other newcomers. Lori has us change partners and I'm paired up with a guy named Gus, a man I find so good looking I probably would never speak to him under different circumstances. Dancing with him, I get this crazy, pornographic thrill when he shifts his hand from the center of my back to the base of my neck and my hand slips down his shoulder, feeling out the bulkiness of his tricep. Our eyes keep meeting and breaking apart, and I feel myself beginning to sweat, confused as to whether it's from my sudden nervousness or the physical exertion of dancing. I am almost thankful when Lori stops the dancing to teach everyone a simple line dance.

Then suddenly the hour is up, the class is over, everyone applauds and thanks Lori. But no one leaves the room: the lights are dimmed, the music brightened. The class was only an appetizer; now the main course—the Dance—begins. An

awkwardness momentarily descends over the crowd, everyone looking eagerly from the sidelines at the empty dance space in the center of the room until two guys whom I suspect are lovers or ex-boyfriends hanging out together break the curse and begin dancing. When I first starting coming to these dances, I hardly danced with anyone, preferring to watch from the side, trying to pick up the steps as the music changed. But one of the things I like most about these dances is the unspoken rule of Southern politeness—that if someone asks you to dance you do not say no—a rule that has pulled quite an assortment of strangers toward me, and me hesitantly out to the dance floor, cautioning my partner of my inexperience.

Tonight I dance more than I have at any of the other dances I have attended, attributable, I think, to the fact that I am more comfortable and the rhythm of the steps now feels natural to me. I dance with Blair, a thin, tanned fellow with a chin full of hair, and Judy finds me on the sidelines and twirls me out to the floor. Two-step dancing has its hits like every other style of music, and the crowd swells to the dance floor as the taped music reels through favorites by Dolly Parton, Garth Brooks, Clint Black, Mary Chapin Carpenter, and almost anything by k.d. lang. More and more people begin to arrive—the better, more experienced dancers—and they take to the floor, whirling around the room, making all this motion as giddy as a ballroom competition. I recognize several people I have noticed or met from the other dances I have attended; in fact, I am beginning to sense a regular crowd who follow the underground circuit of bars and clubs in Manhattan where gay and lesbian two-step dancing is done on different nights of the week. Everyone I speak to here tonight seems to find this type of dancing addictive, as invigorating and popular as country music has become.

There are few things I enjoy as much as dancing, an outgrowth, I believe, of being a product of the disco generation. When I was first struggling with my sexual identity back in the seventies, the

most important thing a friend did for me was to take me to a disco, opening up a world of men who acted, believed, and thought just like I did. Even when AIDS began changing the landscape, I found comfort and solace simply through music and dancing; by then, dancing—or going out to the clubs—was no longer for me about cruising for sex; it was simply a physical pleasure, as narcotic and indulgent as going to a gym, and, as my friend Chris advised, a vital way "to keep moving."

Across the room, I see two guys I know from ACT UP. One of them, Hank, I dated before he started dating the guy he's with tonight, a fellow with a charming smile, named Dave, who's not as angry and defensive as Hank. On both of the dates that I had with Hank, he grew indignant because my level of anger wasn't as high as his. I told him people respond in different ways, which was something he didn't want to hear. I'm glad that Dave was able to "tame the beast," as I often tease both of them when I see them at the Monday night meetings. They've been a couple now for almost four years. I watch them take to the floor and dance by me, giving them both a little nod when I catch their eyes.

I dance with Gus on a slower tempo song. He leads and I follow, but when the song transitions into a group line dance we both stop. I try to find something to say to him, to keep a conversation going, but the music is too loud and boisterous, then someone arrives and asks him to dance, so I turn to the fellow beside me and ask him out to the dance floor.

The hours literally dance by; every now and then the dancing breaks into a waltz or a pseudo-square dance called the Cotton Eye Joe. When the room shifts into the Texas Cha-Cha, a line dance performed to Clint Black's song "Gulf of Mexico," I am overwhelmed by the romance of it, the choreography a simple series of fluid walks and pivots. I look around for someone to dance with, then realize my desperation must show, so I walk to the table where drinks are being sold. I buy a ticket to exchange for a beer and stand on the sidelines, sipping and smiling.

And then a tall, handsome man asks me to dance. As he leads me to the dance floor, it occurs to me that I met him years ago at a house party on Fire Island. When he introduces himself as Phil, I am convinced it is him, but I do not say anything; I merely place my hand at his shoulder and we begin to dance. As I recall Phil had a lover back then, a Puerto Rican expatriate named Randall who wore thick leather cuffs around his wrists, and as we move brightly, swiftly around the room, I wonder if his lover succumbed to the same fate as the friend who invited me to all those parties that summer. Lee was an entertainment publicist and was always being asked to one place or another and I was lucky he enjoyed having me tag along on the ride. That summer was fifteen years ago, and I wonder why it has taken so long to run into Phil again. It makes me think about all of the guys who have come and gone since Lee. Phil tightens the grip around my waist, and as he leans in closer I can smell the sweat of him. Even if he remembered me, he leaves abruptly when the dance is over.

A little later when I glance at my watch I notice it is almost midnight, and like Cinderella I decide to leave the ball early, not wanting to break the enchantment. Gus catches me at the doorway and writes his phone number on a slip of paper for me, and I leave feeling buoyant and hopeful.

On the subway Uptown, I wonder if all this dancing, all this Southern country stuff, is a way of finding the roots I left behind when I moved to Manhattan from Atlanta almost two decades ago, to give myself a stronger identity in a city that sometimes seems ready to swallow me whole. In the last few months I have been searching out Southern culture in the city more and more, in restaurants, music, bookstores, even in the way I dress—I have now adopted an affinity for wearing boots. I wonder if this means I am changing or simply maturing. Sometimes, like tonight, I have to force myself from becoming too nostalgic since I've developed a tendency to break into tears at even the silliest memory.

Back home in my apartment the music from the dance is still

running through my head. I practice the steps again in the mirror before I brush my teeth. I float around the room, to stop reminding myself that I am alone. Or lonely. After all, I have a new phone number to call and someone to look forward to seeing again. Why is it that such a simple thing as this can make me feel so happy?

I dance some more. Quick-quick, slow, slow. Quick-quick, slow, slow. No, I think. It's not in my roots. It's in my genes. I just love dancing. It makes me forget a lot of things.

The Best of Bobby Red

At present, the documentary was over ten hours long, and Red was silently grateful that there was little of him in any of the footage. Red believed that Kavi had taken homage to the extreme, shooting footage of Jon's daily decline for seven months using a hand-held camera with a self-contained lighting unit. In the most recent cut of documentary, Jon ate cereal at the kitchen table, drank a glass of water in the bathroom, and sat on the couch and looked away from the television set, toward the camera, as if he were about to say something. This morning, before Red left the house, Kavi was adamant about certain things staying in his film: the pile of Kleenex on the floor by the couch, the close-up of the liquid in the IV bag dripping into the tubing, and the vomit scene in the bathtub. Kavi admitted to Red that he knew he needed to trim the documentary to a more manageable time limit in order to find a distributor; his last documentary—about rain and fire destroying the homes in the hills above Malibu—ran close to four hours and was never shown in a theater.

"He could have been a great actor," Kavi said while Red was boiling water to make instant coffee. "He had the talent."

Kavi and Jon had been boyfriends for a year-and-a-half, meeting when Jon had gotten a small part in a TV commercial where Kavi was working the boom. Kavi had been an accountant before he began working in show biz, which Red believed explained his zest for inexhaustible detail. Kavi and Red had an uneasy alliance, in

part because Kavi resented Red's strong, enduring bond with Jon and in part because Red resented that Kavi had turned Jon's once spotless apartment into a jumble of wires and cords and terminals and keyboards. Kavi's editing equipment was now set up on the kitchen table, occupying the space where Red and Jon had once eaten their meals when it was just the two of them living in the apartment.

"He took himself too seriously," Red said.

"You're one to talk," Kavi said. "When were you ever serious about anything?"

"He never seemed to be enjoying acting," Red answered, ignoring the insult about his own character. "I could always see his mind at work."

"That was part of his charm," Kavi said in an annoyed tone. "He was always trying to do things a little bit better than the other guy." Kavi rotated his neck to ease the tension of sitting still too long in one position. They were both depressed that Jon was gone; a miserable emptiness hovered between them. On the screen of Kavi's editing machine was a frozen frame of Jon in the bathroom, photographed chest up, his hand clasping the metal pole, and the IV bag suspended behind his head. Red thought Jon's eyes looked vacant, devoid of any meaning. Kavi had photographed this scene in the last month Jon was alive. Jon could barely speak without sputtering and clearing his throat.

Red turned off the heat for the boiling water and decided he did not want the coffee. "Want to share a joint?" he asked Kavi.

"See?" Kavi answered. "See what I mean?"

Jon had hated documentaries, said there was always something a little bit too phony about them; the subjects were always too self-conscious of the camera, the director too determined to put across a point a view. Once, many years ago, when Red had just moved to LA, he and Jon had gone to see a documentary about a French family living in a farmhouse in Provence. The mother and father and two sons and youngest daughter did nothing but eat

and talk in front of the camera. "What a waste of film," Jon said as they walked to where Jon had parked his car. "They didn't even *show* the farm."

Jon had endured watching repeat viewings of the four hours of fire and rain in Malibu because he was in love with Kavi. Red had watched it once, because he had loved and respected Jon like a brother.

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Eight years before, Red had landed in West Hollywood at the age of twenty-seven, unable to find a decent acting job in New York after four years in the army, one year at a junior college, and two years in drama classes. He shared a bed with Jon, one of his former New York acting school classmates. They were not lovers but guys who fooled around with each other when they weren't fooling around with others. Jon was two years older, tall and matinee handsome. Serious about being a legitimate actor in motion pictures or television, he continued to audition for workshops and did cold readings for screenwriters, working out at the Sports Connection every day to keep himself in shape. Jon had moved to Los Angeles three months before Red joined him, offering Red a place to stay when his first roommate moved out to move in with his newest boyfriend. In New York, Red had been through a number of obsessive and possessive short-term relationships and found he was more comfortable being buddies with a guy, preferring companionship over commitment. Jon was a serial dater, never wanting to give up making something work until he *had* to admit defeat, and he had relied on Red's friendship to fill in the gaps between men.

One afternoon, during Red's first month of living in Los Angeles, while Red and Jon were eating alfresco at The Abbey, a café in West Hollywood not far from their apartment, a balding fellow approached their table and said to Red, "I don't care what

the size of your dick is, I'll put you in any movie you want to do." The balding fellow handed Red a card that had the name of an adult-video production company printed on it.

Jon had been appalled that Red had agreed to it so easily. "You're not even gonna try and audition for something?"

"For what?" he answered. "I need a job now."

"You're not even going to try children's theater first?"

In Jon's opinion, working in children's theater was scraping the bottom of a barrel for an acting job—children were a too appreciative audience and did not understand the true subtleties and techniques of acting. Red had never been a good actor, nor had he considered himself to be a good actor. He thought attempting foreign accents made him feel like a phony, and he couldn't do Shakespeare—there were too many strange words and syllables—as he had no idea what the meaning was behind what he was trying to speak. Jon could do both easily, though he had not found work with either skill. When they had been in acting classes in Manhattan, Jon had corralled his friends into a variety of other acting jobs—industrials, trade shows, runway modeling or convention work—anything that legitimately resembled "acting for pay." Red had once been hired to wear a giant condom costume for a health fair, so he didn't believe the leap to adult films could be any more drastic.

"Children scare me," Red answered in his trademark hoarse and husky whisper. His voice was low, without any range, already ruined by cigarettes and booze. "And I make them cry."

Red was shorter than Jon, wiry, compact, and lean. His real name was Bobby Lothan. He was fair-skinned and a natural redhead, hence the nickname he had earned since his days in the army and had never left behind. The army had made him rock solid, and he still wore his bright, bristly red hair in a buzz cut. He seldom relied on an expensive gym membership to keep in shape. Instead, he spent hours doing sit-ups, push-ups, pull-ups, or jogging whenever the itch to exercise overwhelmed his desire to

be high. On duty in Florida, he had gotten his right arm tattooed. At first, just a sunburst at the shoulder—a wild, rope-like design in blue, black, yellow, and red ink—like the kind you'd see if were high on something and had been raised in the late sixties or early seventies. Very bubbly and starry and psychedelic, like an early Peter Max album cover. But since Red loved to drink, too—no, since in those days, he loved to get *drunk*, he kept going back to the tattoo parlor and adding more to the design till the ink stretched from his shoulder to his wrist. He'd done this long before it was trendy, before every buffed porn star in the biz sported fully tattooed limbs; once, he even told Jon he might have inspired the trend.

Everyone wanted to study his tattoo, which Red himself had designed for the artist to ink. But first they wanted to see his dick. Red had never had a problem showing either his tattoo or his dick. It was round and long and tapered like a beer bottle, which had been a delight to the balding fellow, a producer-director named Peter Cold, when Red had shown up at the production office the following day. Since that day in Peter Cold's office, Red had never had to fall back on a real job in Los Angeles; in part because Jon had always created a home for Red, working at odd jobs to pay the rent on the little apartment they shared: house painting, waitering, and word-processing between auditions. A couple of TV commercials and residuals also kept them afloat.

Jon had a plain and determined ambition to become a good actor and refused to believe that his homosexuality could hamper his success. He was giving and nurturing, volunteering to usher at a performance or deliver meals to homebound patients. He didn't drink to the excesses that Red did and seldom did drugs. He stayed away from clubs, not wanting to be "caught up in that scene." Red's wilder habits and addictions were what prevented Jon from completely falling in love with Red, unlike Red's other suitors. Jon wasn't humorless, however, without any self-irony or tendencies to camp it up. In fact, he liked to play up his goody-goodiness to

an extreme, particularly when he was between acting jobs—which was most the time. He often likened himself to Melanie Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind* enduring Red's more manipulative Scarlett O'Hara tendencies. Both he and Red had been raised in the same area of south Georgia and they still sported traces of Southern accents when flustered. There had been times when Jon and Red had been dining at a restaurant on Sunset or Melrose when a free round of drinks would be sent over by another table, followed by a gentleman's inquiry about a potential three-way or a group orgy. Jon always politely declined, but Red usually pursued the invitation, more interested in scoring free booze and drugs than in participating in a party of multiple sex partners.

"Oh Mellie," Red would sigh. "Let your hair down once in a while. Live it up a little!"

"Scarlett, dear," Jon would calmly reply. "Dearest Scarlett. You've living it up enough for the both of us."

"Then you disapprove of me and my big, fat dick?"

Jon's eyes would brighten, and he would act out his hurt, disappointment, and honesty. "Of course not," he would whisper. "I just wish you would use it with your heart."

❍

Red had been featured on the box cover of his first video and, not long afterward, was hired by an award-winning Hollywood producer for a "personal performance." There followed a few personal high-end clients who came and went depending on the quality of Red's performance. That usually depended on how fucked up he was on arrival or how many drugs he consumed during the session. Many clients felt that he should be more assertive and take-charge; that he should, as rough and rugged as he looked, be the boss, the drill sergeant, the man. Red was a casual, good ole redneck kind of guy, more willing to just lie back and see what transpired. He was also more of a puddler than a shooter, which

seemed to disappoint most of his first-time customers. No big money shot. No exploding come like in the videos. That was all another fellow. Brought in by Peter Cold for a special effect. But the truth of it was, Red's heart was never into hustling. This lack of motivation was always being taken as another example of his bad-boy attitude. Red really liked being stoned or high or drunk and just acting wild. This was always what he felt the videos had captured best.

Red's twenty-four videos (not including the compilation *Best of Bobby Red*) had stretched out over a five-year period. *Beach Head* had been shot on location in Malibu at a beach house that had belonged to a "guy who knew a guy who knew a guy." *Water Boy* was set in a steam room; *Bound* in a highway truck-stop. In *Crazed* he had been fucked while straddling a Harley. *Hidden* actually had a plot line and dialogue. He played a mechanic in love with a married man cheating on his wife. He had earned a reputation for being an outrageous, druggy butch bottom, though he had topped as often in his films. One year, Red had won an award for his role as a Mafia hit man in *Hired Gun*. Another time, a magazine had named him "Bottom of the Year." Red "unofficially retired" when Jon got sick, though the back story was that his retirement began as early as the year Jon brought Bruce back to their apartment. Jon and Bruce had been out on a first date. They saw a play at a theater on Santa Monica, followed by dinner at Mark's—a restaurant on La Cienega that Jon particularly liked because the handsome, young wait staff always touched the customers at the neck or the shoulder or the forearms while they waited for their food to arrive. Bruce was another wannabe actor in a city full of wannabe actors. He was no taller than Red and just as stocky and well built. He was wearing a thin blue surgeon's shirt and drawstring pants, the dark swirls of his chest hair exposed as he followed Jon to the bedroom. Red had been sitting on the couch, watching something on TV. When Jon had introduced Bruce to Red, Bruce's eyes dilated as if he had just been unexpectedly offered a free sample of a wondrous

new drug. Red knew that Bruce must have seen one of Red's videos and recognized him. He also knew that he would sleep with Jon's new boyfriend at some point in the immediate future, and saw the sticky unfolding of a secret and complicated courtship with Jon as an injured party. Red had slept with a number of Jon's former boyfriends, but never anyone Jon had been interested in and dating at the time. He had always waited for the boyfriend to be placed in the former category; one, in fact, had become one of Red's more regular clients. While Jon and Bruce got it on in Jon's bedroom, Red leaned his head against the back of the couch, listening to the deep tones of their voices and breaths, and knew that this time it would be different. Red recalled a guy he filmed a scene with in *Mission Style* who looked like Bruce. A dark-eyed, swarthy, Italian fellow, with a long dick that curved like a banana. As far as Red was concerned that had been one of his best performances. He had been eagerly attracted to his costar. He hadn't even needed any drugs.

❍

"You can have all the tapes," Red said to Kavi. The joint Red was smoking had made him hungry, and he was searching through the kitchen cabinets for something that might satisfy him, deciding against a box of stale croutons and opening a fresh box of saltine crackers instead.

"You don't want them?" Kavi asked. "Not even the ones you're in?"

Red shook his head no. Red and Kavi had until the end of the week to move everything out of the apartment. Kavi was moving back in with his sister in Van Nuys. Red was still waiting to hear from Bruce, who had not come back into town for Jon's funeral last week because of an acting gig in Hungary. Bruce was making a Roman epic in which he had screen time, dialogue, and billing. When Bruce had left LA about two months ago, first for

New York where rehearsals were to take place, and then for an extensive period of filming in Hungary, he had sublet the house in Beverly Hills, forcing Red to move back in with Jon and Kavi and to sleep on the foldout couch. Red, however, was grateful for that inconsiderate act; it had allowed him to spend more time with Jon in his final days. Red could not remember when—or if—Bruce had said he was returning to LA. Things between them had not exactly ended with Bruce's leaving, but had only been suspended in a vague, undetailed state. He knew that Bruce would not be faithful. They had never shared, nor wanted, a monogamous relationship with each other. And though Red had suspended his video work, he had not altogether abandoned his clients, even when Bruce had suggested it wasn't necessary for Red to continue hustling because Bruce made more than enough money for both of them. Now with Jon dead and buried, Red felt the unsympathetic absence of Bruce and wanted some hint at closure or some kind of reassurance that their three-year relationship was not over. Most of all, he needed the next place to live and knew that where that place might be, would, in part, be determined by Bruce, because Red had no savings of his own.

"I've seen all of them," Red answered. "I know what's on them." The crackers were making his mouth drier, but instead of drinking something to wash it away, he took another toke of his joint, squeezing out the last remaining embers.

"You gonna show up stoned?" Kavi asked.

Later that morning Red was filming a new video, a comeback being orchestrated by Peter Cold via a barrage of phone calls over the last week as preparations began. And Red sensed that Kavi was probably anxious to have him out of the apartment in order to do some concentrated work on his documentary before having to pack up all of his editing equipment to take to his sister's. Kavi and Red had slept together twice; the first time, about two months ago when Jon was in the hospital, and again last week, the afternoon after Jon's funeral. Kavi, the son of immigrant parents from New

Delhi, had skin the color of caramel, a full head of blue-black hair, and an attitude that flipped between curiosity and condescension. The first time they had sex together it had been quick and rough, both of them frustrated and anxious over Jon's rapidly declining health. Kavi had fucked Red fast and hard as though they were filming a video. The second time they had sex, it was more plaintive, compassionate, and sympathetic. Red had simply taken Kavi's cock in his mouth and slowly brought him to an orgasm. Kavi had reciprocated with a lengthy, thoughtful handjob.

Kavi, like Jon, had never considered Red's adult video work as a serious business; to him, it was only a small notch above working in a circus. And it was true that Red had never given it the professional respect that many of his younger costars did. But Kavi, like Jon, had seen every one of Red's videos and, in fact, had favorite films, scenes, and costars, and often wanted to know the off-camera details.

When Jon and Kavi had first started dating, Red and Bruce met them for dinner at a restaurant on Sunset. Red had moved out of Jon's apartment and was living with Bruce in Beverly Hills—in one of the more modest homes on the street where Lucille Ball once lived. Much to Bruce and Jon's dismay, the conversation had not been about casting or auditions or recent movies or plays, but about Red's work in porn. And it had been instigated by Kavi.

"There's seldom any subtlety, is there?" Kavi asked him. "No mystery? You know everything that is going to happen before it happens."

"Sometimes there are surprises," Red said.

Jon speared a scallop with the times of his fork, scrubbing it vigorously in the sauce. Bruce sliced away at his steak.

"And what's with all the shaved pubic hair?" Kavi asked. "Shaved balls?"

"It's called grooming," Red answered. "It makes some guys look bigger."

"It looks so unnatural," Kavi said "And the noises. What's with

all the noises? The grunting, the slapping, the 'Oh, yeah, fuck me stud, fuck me big boy.'"

"A lot of that is added later in the editing room," Red answered.

"Don't I know it!" Kavi said.

"I take it you're not as verbal in bed," Red said.

"A good, hard dick always works for me," Kavi said, throwing a sly grin toward Jon. "But what about that music? It always sounds so—*electronic*."

"There's usually never any music on the set," Red said. "Unless someone's brought a boom box."

"And the cheesy setups," Kavi said. "I mean, all these hot guys living in the same house, just wandering around having sex with each other. I mean, that totally never happens, does it?"

"Sex happens everywhere," Jon said, breaking into the conversation and smiling. "Doesn't it Bruce?"

"Some moments feel more real than others," Red said, watching Bruce's eyes narrow with apprehension and as a warning not to continue the subject any further in this direction. "But the bottom line is entertainment."

❍

As it turned out, Bruce and Red hooked up the same night they met. Red had fallen asleep on the couch with the TV on. He had woken up hours later from the sound and the flickering screen and turned the TV off. Jon's bedroom door was closed, which Red understood to mean that Bruce had not left and that Red should sleep on the foldout couch, instead of crawling into his side of the bed and beside Jon. Red walked to the bathroom first, but did not flip on the light. He stood in front of the toilet and aimed at the center of the white porcelain rim. In the darkness, above the sound of his own leaking, Red had sensed the bedroom door opening, the knob twisting, and the wood cracking away from the wall. What happened next seemed

both natural and instinctual. Bruce was standing at the doorway of the bathroom—Red had not closed the door for privacy since he had not turned on the light. The bathroom was so small that Bruce was immediately standing directly behind Red. In the groggy fantasy of the moment, Bruce reached out his hand, slid it around the tight skin of Red's waist, ran it quickly over the bristly hairs of his groin, and used his fingers to surround Red's cock, shaking out the last drops of urine for Red. Red felt the warm dampness of Bruce's breath at his neck as Bruce's other hand ran across the rise of his buttocks and traveled toward his ribs and chest, the fingers of the other hand now kneading, stretching, and stroking Red's cock.

Red twisted his body, and their mouths opened into a wide, dark kiss. Red's hand had dropped away from his own cock and found the thickening one of Bruce, and they stood like this, kissing, groping, and stroking each other in the blackness of the bathroom with Jon asleep in the nearby bedroom. Soon, Bruce fell to his knees and took Red's cock in his mouth. Red felt both the thrill and the misery of the pleasure of it, wondering how Jon would react when the time came for him to react.

"So you've gone and done it at last, Scarlett," Jon said to Red when, three weeks later, Bruce broke up with Jon, telling him that he was already seeing Red. "It's tragic enough that you can woo and bed every man in the biz, but now you've gone and sunk your claws into my beau, too." Jon was maintaining his dignity with a sense of humor, and Red was relieved that Jon did not appear seriously wounded or defeated.

"Oh, Mellie," Red said in his roughest, hoarse, acting voice. "Fiddle dee dee. It's not like it would have ever worked out with you and Rhett Butler anyway."

❍

"I think I'm finally close to finishing the scene," Kavi said, when Red dispensed with the crackers that morning and sobered up

enough to zap a tray of macaroni and cheese in the microwave. "But it's feeling fake now."

Kavi replayed the edited scene on his editing monitor for Red. It was of Jon walking into the bathroom, unable to decide if he needed to shit or shower. Attached to his arm was a needle attached to IV tubing attached to a solution bag of liquid minerals hanging from a metal pole, which always seemed to be in the way of Jon's feet. A close-up of Jon showed his thin, distraught features, his confused expression, and the blankness of his eyes. Jon mumbled something on camera which Kavi said he would fix in the final edit. Then Jon leaned his thin frame over the rim of the tub and vomited. The gagging and retching seemed to go on too long, second by second by agonizing second.

"I shouldn't have forced him to throw up," Kavi said. "He wasn't that nauseous."

Kavi paused the scene and Red thought for sure he detected a sly smile at the corner of Jon's lips, as if Jon knew it was all just an act and the take had been successful. It filled Red with pride to detect Jon's technique—he had almost fooled Kavi, too.

"Did I ever tell you about the day he wouldn't let me film him?" Kavi asked Red. "He said he wasn't up to it. When was Jon *not* up to performing in front of a camera? That guy was a natural ham!"

○

After eating the macaroni and cheese and half a box of mint cookies and downing a beer, Red did two-hundred push-ups and a thousand sit-ups, then shaved and showered. Afterward, while toweling dry, Red found the scrap of paper in his wallet where Bruce had written down the phone number of the apartment in Hungary where he would be staying while filming. Next to the phone number was a plus sign and the number nine, which Red remembered meant that it was nine hours later in Hungary than LA. Red dialed the phone number and listened to the static until

it was replaced by short, pulsing tones.

Red's relationship with Bruce had thrived so long because they were both addicted to sex and to each other. Bruce was the inventive and exploratory one, or at least the one who initiated the role playing or spanking or watersports or new toys or additional sex partners. Red was always a willing playmate, in part because Bruce treated him like a treasured purchase, something he had always craved but which seemed out of reach until he had suddenly held a winning hand, and in part because Bruce never gambled with their affections. Once Bruce had orchestrated a partner swap with another gay couple. He called it off at the last minute and he confessed to Red that he was afraid of losing Red this way. The truth of it was Bruce was already smitten with the younger man of the other gay couple and had been having a secretive four-week affair, which Red had learned about through an overhead message left on their answering machine. The cancellation had been Bruce's ruse to keep Red off the scent.

Red had stayed with Bruce in part because he felt he had always held Jon back from becoming emotionally involved with another man, and because uncovering Bruce's bad-boy behavior became a new addiction for Red. As a teenager, Bruce had married the aging adolescent starlet of a faltering TV sitcom, an arrangement that resulted in a son with his own bad-boy tendencies. The starlet had never found work beyond her first sitcom, but Bruce had made a substantial wealth from turning his part-time real estate earnings and inherited family money into gambling jackpots. While Kavi had been charting Jon's decline with a video camera, Red had been uncovering the hidden layers of Bruce—a second wife who lived in Sherman Oaks, a fake resume with made-up acting roles, a fake diploma from Berkeley, and canceled checks written to a dominatrix Red had once introduced Bruce to while they were out at dinner. It had actually become more of an adventure for Red to stay sober and see what stunt Bruce would pull next than to opt out of another bad relationship by getting high or drunk. And

once Bruce had reached a comfort zone in his relationship with Red, Bruce had begun giving Red handfuls of cash to deposit in Red's personal bank account, as a way to avoid excessive alimony payments to both of his ex-wives. That money, which had then been transferred into a money market account in Red's name, could easily create a minor scandal for Bruce if it came to light now, now that Bruce was on his way to becoming a minor celebrity.

"Pronto?" a deep, sleepy male voice on the other end of the phone answered.

"Bruce?" Red asked.

"Just a sec."

"Bruce?"

"Red?"

"Who was that who answered the phone?"

"One of the extras," Bruce said. "We're playing poker. How are you? Anything wrong?"

"How's it going?" Red asked.

"More delays because of the rain," Bruce said. "I don't know when this is going to end."

Bruce did not ask about Kavi, nor of how Red was coping without Jon in the recent days after his death. Instead, he talked about one of his costars who was involved with a local underage girl. At the end of the tale, Red said, "I can fly out for a visit, if you want. My passport is still good."

"But I wouldn't be able to spend time with you," Bruce said, his voice sounding shaky and nervous to Red. "If we resume filming, you'd be sitting here in the room or out getting into trouble. I don't know if I could get you out of any trouble. You're always getting into trouble. Remember the cop who pulled us over in Santa Monica? He thought we were looking for drugs."

"We were," Red answered.

"But we hadn't found them *yet*," Bruce laughed. "What if something like that happened here? I couldn't get you out of another jam."

"Nope," Red said. "Guess not."

Next Bruce began to tell Red how it was necessary to keep some of his personal attributes hidden, which Red took to mean that he was not wanted on the set in Hungary because it would immediately be taken that they were more than just friends. "I can't have people talking about me right now," Bruce whispered into the phone, as if he were already hiding his secretive life with Red from someone close by, not someone in the future. "I need to keep it squeaky clean."

"Okay," Red said and then added, after a deep breath, "I'm going to move out soon."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not going to stay here," Red explained. "In Jon's apartment. Without Jon. Kavi's moving out, so I am too. I wanted to let you know, so there wouldn't be any bad feelings when you came back."

There was an awkward silence while Red waited for Bruce to suggest another alternative or to warn him not to use any of the money in his money market account. When neither happened, Red said goodbye and hung up. No endearments were exchanged, which led Red to believe that perhaps something was already going on with the male extra with the deep voice who had answered the phone. As far as Red was concerned his relationship with Bruce was now over, and if he needed to use some of the money to find a new place, he would take it out of the account without asking Bruce's permission. It wasn't like he was stealing. It was money in *his* name. He didn't want *all* of the money, just enough to get to the next place. And it was money he had earned *acting* like he was in love with Bruce, at least during the last year when he had begun to absorb the not-too-subtle facts of his partner's dishonest character. If Bruce had ever accused him otherwise, Red would simply expose the lies. The falsity. *Bruce's* acting. Bruce had gambled on Red and lost. Red had arrived at this decision in the name of peacekeeping, in the spirit of forgive and forget, and in hopes of putting closure

on Bruce in order to move beyond his missing Jon. And hovering over Red's conscience was the deep voice of the man who had answered the phone. "Pronto. Just a sec." He played the words over and over in his mind and realized that what he was feeling was hurt and jealousy and disappointment, like a kid who had not been invited to his best friend's party. The more he thought about the unnamed extra who had answered the phone in Bruce's apartment late at night, the more certain he felt it was time to move ahead.

❍

"I'm not taking any chances," a guy with fake-blond hair said to Red when he was on the set. The fake blond was half-dressed, or, rather, he was dressed in only boots and boxer shorts. His body was incredibly slender. Red's trademark, naturally bright red hair had been shaved close to the scalp by a dark-eyed young guy who was working as the groomer, which had made Red immediately skeptical that a comeback might have been a bad idea. The scenario of the new video was that Red was a part of a gang of skinheads and punks, all of them meeting up at an empty warehouse. Peter Cold had installed a chain-link fence and placed black vinyl-covered benches around the cold concrete floor. Leather slings and straps and harnesses and metal chains had been suspended from a tower of rusty steel scaffolding. The climax of the shoot was to be Red double fucked by two similarly built fake blond-haired guys, one of whom was now trying to engage him in a conversation about the risks of the day's work.

"I mean, there are no residuals, no back pay, no union or health insurance," the half-dressed fake blond said. "All I get out of this is a few bucks and some self-promotion—and hopefully no infections or diseases."

Red reached for a beer bottle that was bobbing in a cooler full of ice water. Peter Cold at least kept the set stocked. "So you know what you're getting into," Red said.

"I mean, I hate it when some of these guys don't even gargle," the fake blond said. "Did you gargle?"

"I think I flossed this morning," Red answered, trying to be humorous. He took a swig of the cold beer, hoping the guy would go elsewhere. Red had stripped to allow the groomer to shave his balls and trim his pubic hair, which now, too, seemed devoid of its naturally bright red color. When the fake blond didn't make a move to go elsewhere, Red said to him, "If you don't want to do it, you can be replaced. It's not too late to back out."

"I've got a reputation, too," the fake blond said. "Lots of guys are going to see this one."

It occurred to Red that he might have worked before with this fellow. Or almost worked with him. There was a guy who had backed out at the last minute when he was filming another video, way back when. Red tried to imagine the fake blond without the blond tint, then decided it would take too much effort and instead said, "Have a beer and relax. If you're uptight it will show up on the film."

"What do you know?" the fake blond spitefully snapped back. "You're barely conscious when you film."

Red took the comment in stride. "Seems like I got a reputation, too," he said.

"Did you douche?" the guy asked Red. "You've got to douche. This double fuck shit seems pretty risky to me."

"To you?" Red laughed and shouted as the fake-blond walked away. "Who's fucking whom?"

Red was still laughing when the groomer approached him again and said, "I know of a place in North Hollywood. You can pay for a furnished room by the week."

Red leaned down and snorted up a line of coke with his left nostril. He pinched his nose, swallowed, felt the rush of the drug arrive in his bloodstream and his brain. He smiled at the groomer and said, "Maybe I'll check it out. Thanks."

In the center of the room, one of the two fake blond-haired

guys—not the one who had just been talking with Red—was nude and standing in the beam of a floodlight, while another man, fully dressed, held a light meter up to the bare skin of his chest. Off the set, near a cameraman, the other fake blond was now talking with Peter Cold in an animated way, using his fingers to point to one of the vinyl benches. Red had seen Peter Cold with such guys before, sitting at one of the outdoor tables at The Abbey. Peter Cold always held their attention confidently, his hand resting on one of theirs, always making promises he could not keep. Red had had sex with Peter Cold more times than he could remember. "Don't ever give it away for free," Peter Cold was always reminding Red, "especially to a lover." Peter Cold had a reputation as bad as Red's and worst than Bruce's. Low pay. No residuals. Not a stitch of insurance. No perks. Certainly no perks, except a cooler full of ice cold, cheap beer on the set for a bunch of guys who brought their own drugs.

Red took a swig of beer, swallowing a pill one of the electricians had given him. He closed his eyes, imagining Peter Cold talking the fake blond out of his anxieties. He felt oddly blessed and lucky; after all this time, he hadn't ended up in that canyon of dead porn stars, someone *without* a future. Something had always kept him going. Someone had always been watching his back. Bruce. A client now and then. Peter Cold. Even Kavi. But in the last eight years Jon had always been there. Now he was not, and the honest and truthful core of Red's life was gone. The best of Bobby Red was behind him. Over. The End. *Finis*. In the images behind his eyelids Red found Jon's profile, dark and handsome and thoughtful, and Red thought about how he should change his life. Maybe he could try something legit. Do something on the stage now. With clothes on or in a costume. With dialogue and billing. Maybe attempt Shakespeare or one of the classics. Or hell, even do children's theater. He broke out into a little laugh, hearing himself say in both the mocking manner of Mammy and the fearful tones of Prissy, "Lawdy, Miss Scarlett, Miss Mellie's dead and Rhett Butler's gone for good! And now the Yanks have gone and taken Tara away, too!

Miss Scarlett, Miss Scarlett, whatever are you gonna do now?"

He was still laughing when he was lifted into the sling. In the lights and shadows, Red gripped hold of the thick muscle of a thigh or a forearm, he couldn't quite tell which in his drugged-out state. The two fake blonds stood eagerly in front of Red while the lights were readjusted, reminding Red vaguely of that party scene at Tara, early in the movie, when Scarlett is being courted by all the young men in the county and is beseeched by bright-haired twins. Red felt a prick of pain, slight and uncomfortable, then a wide rush of pleasure when the first of the fake-blonds entered him. Red's head lolled back, and he became blissful and simple, fascinated by the texture of skin and hair and muscle on display in the cold concrete room, like a three-month-old baby watching the light and wind move the shapes of a mobile toy suspended over its crib. *Fiddle dee dee*, he thought, when the second blond man entered him, *bring on the rest of the boys, too. And don't forget about the crew!* He was the guy who could do that—take on whatever it was he had to take on to get by and try to have some fun doing it!

Red reached his arms back behind his head and felt the brilliant chill of the metal chain of the sling. It caused him only a moment of consciousness. Then he transformed this pinch of cold into a safe, calm light. *Daylight*, he thought, *I am surrounded by daylight*. The light was warm and bright and full of hope. He could see all the way into tomorrow. Yes, Red decided, tomorrow was already here and it didn't look so bad after all. Certainly not how he had imagined it to be. No, not a bit of darkness there. Yes, he was certain, tomorrow was full of light. Tomorrow was another day!

Do I Know You?

Dear Richard and John,

Thank you so much for sending me the invitation to your Impending Grand Nuptials. I'm very honored and touched to be included as part of your Great Day. And I'm certainly impressed by all the grandeur and the expense of the Big Occasion you are mounting. (The invitation alone could become a museum piece—Heavy-weight paper! Embossed borders! Gilded edges! Translucent Insert!) You must be planning an Elaborate Affair for Hundreds—a four o'clock wedding ceremony on the beach followed by dinner and dancing in town. I'm already dazzled and excited! And I just love that "Festive Attire Requested" bit. No black tie necessary! No suits and neckties that no longer fit me because time and gravity have taken their toll!

But I must confess right up front that I can't exactly place the moment—or place—where we met and bonded enough that you would be so generous to include me in your Special Celebration of Commitment to One Another. Are you the Rich who works out at my gym or Rick-the-personal trainer who gave me his cellphone number a few weeks ago? There is a Rick-with-a-goatee who lives in the apartment two floors above mine. Is that you? Or are you the Richard who works on the floor beneath me? You're not the Dick with the huge cock and the sling on East Fifty-third Street, are you? Or Richard the therapist that I met at the Townhouse about two years ago (and who had that fabulous loft)? I'm certain you're

not the Ricky I hired as a hustler last fall—he would need a lot of work before he could land into such nuptial bliss as what you are up to—I mean, even those *Queer Eye* boys would be hard pressed to convince him to dry out and sober up enough to say, "I Do," but, then again, he *was* a beautiful piece of work, with a dick that could get as hard as a good dick can get... And a rich man could certainly entice him into sticking around for the Next Big Thing he could try... Is that you? Are you that Dick? That Ricky? That Richard?

I know there was a friend, Rick, from my ACT UP days, but he is long gone from this planet and that can't be you. And then there was another Richard who was on my phone tree list—that's not you, is it, after all these years? Or are you that older Richard, the Richard I met at the Man's Country baths back in the late seventies? My God, that would make us both, what?—well, almost ancient and shriveled-up and certainly almost-off the marriage-market list!

So it must be John whom I know—Is this John from the Black Party in 1995? (The guy in chaps I gave such a long, delicious blow job to in the balcony?) Or the Jon who was the volunteer at the March on Washington in 1993? (We shared a bagel together while waiting to head down to the Mall). You're not the JJ from the Gay Pride Parade in Manhattan back in, well, 1986, are you? (Jonathan James Something-Or-Another, as I recall... the guy who was an ex-boyfriend of my ex-boyfriend—the one who was in the hospital at the time and didn't live much longer that summer?) You're not Johnny, the chorus boy, whom I dated briefly when I was just out of college, are you? Or are you the Jonathan I had the three-way with back in the early nineties? You're not the John who was married to Sharon-Lee, are you?—the guy who swore he was going to get a divorce from his wife and wanted me to fuck him a second (and third) time the night we hooked up. You can't be John from Hewlett Packard—that really well built dude who showed up at my apartment to fix more than just my printer—he told me he was really straight, but didn't mind having sex with a guy and so

he did—have sex with a guy—*me*—and more than once, too, as I recall. This isn't you, is it?

So maybe it is Richard I know after all. Are you the Richard on Perry Street with the beautiful nine-inch cock I greedily devoured one night in 2002? The one with the massage table? Or are you the Dick I had a blind date with (about 4,000 blind dates ago)—the guy I met at Starbucks on Eighth Avenue on April 16, 1999 (and who, by the way, looked nothing like the photo he e-mailed me in advance). Are you the Richie from the summer house in 1985 I fooled around with when our boyfriends weren't around? Or the one on Fourteenth Street in 1991 with a gold Labrador and who liked to do watersports in his bathtub? You can't be Richard-the-Republican I slept with at the Warwick—I mean, he would have had to gone through a lot of therapy to come out of the closet, you know—but, then again, that was something like fifteen years ago, so, well, it could be you? Are you that fucked up Dick?

Come to think of it, there was the John I shared a heart-pounding handjob with during a van ride from the Miami airport to Key West in 1983 (when that near-monsoon canceled our flight and we were driven south in the blinding rainstorm courtesy of the airline). Or did I meet you on the rooftop of Kevin's apartment building on the West Side during his Fourth of July party back in—what—1979? The John with the big blue eyes who was a really great kisser? I hope you're not the John I threw up on during the boat ride around Manhattan when my boss was retiring in 1987. (Who knew gin and tonics could be so deadly on an empty stomach and a swaying vessel? But then you were so sweet—we went back to your place and showered and fooled around for like, well, hours and hours and hours and hours.) Is this you again, after all these years?

Whomever you are, how ever I know you, I am so glad you have each found your Significant Other and I am thankful that whatever past I shared with either (or both) of you did not make a strong enough impact for you to abandon your quest to find your True Soul Mate For All Eternity and thus, you found Each

Other. I am so looking forward to being present at your Special Recognition of Commitment Between Two Gay Men and listening to you exchange your Vows of Companionship—especially, after all the time and memories that have passed between us (unless you're the Richard from the chat room I met last week—then we simply have to smile and nod and keep our little secret, huh?—consider it one of those things that bachelors do before they get hitched).

So, *Yes*, absolutely, I've enclosed my RSVP card (prestamped by you, no less, how *truly* generous). And of course, I'll be sending a thoughtful gift along before the Big Date happens—a quick Google search already shows that you are registered at Bloomies, Tiffany's, and Crate & Barrel! But my big, burning Question of the Day—the one I am saving up to ask when we meet again—is not really How did *We* meet? but How did *You* find each other?—How did *The Two of You* meet? How did it happen? Where did it happen? Details, details, details, dearies—I want to know all the facts. (Because, God knows, I've been trying to meet someone just like you for decades! I have been a Husband Hunter from my Gay Day One!)

I'll also be bringing lots of Kleenex with me to the Big Event, expecting to sob my eyes and heart out because of your fortunate happiness and new marital ecstasy. I'll share my tissues with any one who needs one, you know, and I'll have a few unused condoms in my wallet, too, just in case there is someone who might be interested in seeing what happens. You never know who you might meet next—he could be Mr. Right, after all. Then again, even if he's not—even if he is just Mr. Right Now, I'm not too old yet to overlook a new adventure—and you never know what else you might find along the way... As I always say (and probably said to you), it's good to keep an open mind and be ready for the possibility to change.

All my best and see you soon,
xoxoxo
Jimmy
(aka James, Jameson, Jamey, Jim, JC, or just plain J!)

Manhattan Transfer

Brian Kolman was forty-five years old. His hair had turned gray in his late thirties and he had refused to color it because he felt it finally made him appear successful, though on paper his six-figure income did little to erase the lease on two cars, his son's braces and his daughter's cellphone bill, or the outstanding debt on nineteen credit cards and a thirty-year mortgage on a four-bedroom house in suburban New Jersey. Brian was not a handsome man, but not a bad-looking one either: blue eyed, square jawed, with a nose slightly bigger than he would have preferred if he had been given a choice of styles. His short height kept him on the stocky side, but his workouts with a personal trainer kept his gut from swelling too large and kept him looking more "distinguished" than fatherly.

Gina, Brian's wife, had lost her figure after the birth of their second child, Michelle, fourteen years ago, though their sex life had not begun sputtering until almost five years later, when Gina became convinced that Brian was having an affair with a co-worker (and which he wasn't). Gina's retaliation had not been to clamp her legs together or strap on a chastity belt; her revenge cut deeper, right into Brian's wallet where she knew it would hurt him most. She had developed expensive tastes and costly shopping habits, which had never bothered Brian as long as they were directed toward the welfare of his children, but irked him when it was used to try out a new hairdresser or day spa splurge for herself. And even though Gina kept herself and the children pampered

and spoiled, she had let the housekeeping drift into a slovenly imbalance because she felt she deserved a maid.

For more than a decade Brian had been planning his escape from his wife. First, he would announce a trial separation and move out of the house. Then he would let Gina file for a divorce. It was the best way to soften the blow for the kids. He had decided to wait until Bert and Michelle both reached their teens before he would put his plan into motion, over the years tucking away as much cash as he could out the sight of his wife so that he could afford to start out again on his own—using the money he had saved from health insurance refund checks and cash advances from credit cards which he had locked away in a private safety deposit box.

As a boy he had tasted poverty and had no intention of falling into that hole again; his future independence relied on his continued success in business. The fifth child of a housepainter in Newark, there'd never been enough money for new clothes; he'd spent his adolescence in the hand-me-downs of his older brothers. He'd worked his way through college and business school with part-time jobs and then up from a junior stockbroker to the branch manager of a national brokerage firm, imagining that one day his house in Montclair would be his secondary home, not his primary residence. He was intent on moving into the luxury world of Manhattan, into a Park Avenue co-op with a doorman and an on-site garage, a dream that Gina had waylaid with her first pregnancy, though he did not for a moment regret the fact that they had had children.

In fact, it was his children who had kept him on track; without them he might have ended up like his older brothers, aging drifters without a career focus or a marketable skill. He didn't refuse to help out his siblings or their spouses when they hit rock bottom, which was more often than not, but he also didn't give in to their desire to milk him of his hard-earned income and savings, limiting the amount of money he would give them and making them sign loan papers to borrow and repay the rest. There'd been

a few other unexpected financial set backs in his dream along the way: dance classes and gymnastics camp for Michelle, band instruments for Bert, a trip to Israel for his mother to see her dying sister.

He'd begun looking for apartments in the city in earnest after the end-of-the-year holidays (secretly, without his family's knowledge of it). He had decided that he could do a reverse commute, driving to his office in Montclair while other commuters were headed into the city. With his savings and a forthcoming work bonus he'd have enough for a down payment for a decent place, or so he thought. The real estate market was tight, but it always was, but the realtors he had used had shown him less than desirable properties. (One had a backyard "garden" located in the building's air-shaft and too many listings had closets and alcoves masquerading as separate bedrooms.) Then a co-worker in his office recommended that he rent, not buy. He'd been through his own nasty divorce and said that any property Brian bought before his divorce would be considered communal and up for negotiation. If Gina found an aggressively greedy lawyer, Brian risked losing more than just gaining his freedom.

There had never been another woman who had wrecked Brian's marriage, but there had always been the hope that he would one day find a special lover. Since he was fifteen Brian had discovered and tried to suppress his homosexuality, awkwardly dating girls and sweating through uninspired sex with women. He'd met Gina in high school and all the while dating her, he yearned to know his other classmates more intimately—Russell, the football player, or Andy, the class president, or Jeff, the tall guy with sideburns who was in his calculus class and in the debate club. Brian had had a brief dalliance with his college roommate (a jerk off session together when they were both drunk), and he found his desires toward men increasing with the growing frustration of his marriage. He'd met a few guys on out-of-town business travels, and he'd been lucky to escape the impact of AIDS from what little sexual experiences he

had had with men, and he was now ready and willing to become more intimately and permanently involved with a guy. He wanted a boyfriend or a lover or a significant other. Whatever they called it these days was what he wanted to try to find. His separation and escape from his wife didn't include announcing his "coming out," either on the job or to his family or friends. At work, he'd lose all credibility, risking a certain demotion or termination. Coming out would have to be a slower process, and certainly timed around finding the man of his dreams—and, he believed, the castle they could share together.

By the middle of March Brian had found an apartment on East Seventy-second Street and was ready to sign the lease. It was a luxury rental with a doorman, maid service, a basement garage, and a rooftop health club. It was more per month that Brian had budgeted for, but he chose a smaller unit on a lower floor that had a view of the courtyard instead of the East River. The evening he came home to tell his wife that he was leaving her, she was already gone herself, out the door ahead of him.

In a note placed on the refrigerator with a flower magnet, she wrote him:

Dear Brian,

I need some time to think things through. Please take care of the children.

Gina

At first, Brian thought she had discovered his plan to leave her and this was her method of retaliation. Then, with more thought and the realization that she was not at home, he knew something else must be at work and with time and luck it might play out in his favor. She had clearly abandoned him and her children. If she had done this to be with another lover, she might want to marry again, which would spare Brian alimony and only involve haggling on child support. His spirits soared, though he kept them in check.

There was the children to think about first, their welfare, their behavior, their home.

That evening he canceled all of his wife's credit cards.

❍

At the end of the week Brian received a phone call in his office from one of his credit card companies. A customer service representative told him that a spa in the Berkshires was trying to get a large bill authorized for payment. Brian refused to allow the charge to occur.

Brian spent the next hour waiting for the repercussions—a demanding phone call from the spa, another follow-up phone call from the credit card agency, a weepy phone call from his wife. None of them occurred. Instead, after lunch, the phone rang and it was the principal of his son's high school. Bert had been caught carrying a concealed weapon and was now in the custody of the police. The principal explained that the school had a "zero tolerance" policy toward students possessing weapons of any kind and that his son was to be expelled. Before leaving the office, Brian called in a co-worker to recommend a lawyer.

At the police station Bert explained to his father that the box cutter was used for his after school work stocking shelves at a department store in the mall and he had forgotten to replace it the evening before and was carrying it in his knapsack to return it to work that afternoon after school. Brian's son was not a juvenile delinquent. Bert was a solid B student, had scored in the top fifteen percentile the first time he took the SATs, and had done internships in libraries and language labs. His freshman year he had begun to learn how to play string instruments for the school orchestra—bass, cello, violin—and during the fall sports seasons he was a snare drummer in the marching band.

The school had reported another story of the incident, however. A policeman told Brian that Bert had threatened another student

with the box cutter. Bert told his father the other student was the one who had made the threat first; he'd been called a "fag" and a "douche bag" when he wouldn't give up his homework to the other guy. Bail was paid, a court date set, and Bert was released. Ahead, Brian saw hours and hours and hours of attorney fees to get the charges dropped against his son. His escape to a luxury apartment in the city became a distant dream.

The next day Brian's wife returned home. She cleaned the kitchen and cooked dinner. Later that night, she asked to have her credit cards restored. Brian did not ask her any details of her adventure. He wanted her to see that he didn't care of her whereabouts any more than she didn't care of his. That evening, Brian began sleeping in the guest bedroom.

○

That spring it rained heavily, the ceiling leaked and Brian had the roof of the house repaired. Flooding reshaped his front lawn and a landscaper was brought in to put it into better shape. Brian and Gina met with a lawyer several times to go over Bert's case. Brian tried not to feel at fault for his son's behavior, though Gina did her best to make him appear as a distant and aloof parent. His own father had died of a heart attack when Brian was thirteen, and Brian had spent his teen years negotiating obstacles on his own, without any assistance from his older brothers except for an occasional beating or reprimand. For Brian, there had been no one to explain how to write a check or how to get the smoothest shave. No one to teach him plumbing or carpentry or wiring. No one to advise him how to act (or react) with the opposite sex.

Brian had given Bert everything possible: they had thrown baseballs together, he had shown his son how to build a bookcase, they had gone camping and fishing together, made sure his son took Hebrew classes, and had given him a lavish *bar mitzvah*. Last year Brian had bought Bert a used car to drive back and forth

to school and to his part-time job, and he had agreed to pay the insurance on the car as long as Bert drove his sister where she needed to be. It had been a good arrangement, Bert learning how to check the oil, jump start the battery, change a flat tire, and accept responsibility for another person. Brian was more worried that this turn of events, this setback in his son's character, could bring a streak of relentless bad luck early on into his son's life that would be difficult to turnaround. Brian proceeded to denounce the school authorities and object to labeling his son as a terrorist or a criminal. He went to great lengths to remind the other men on the school board that it had not been uncommon for them to carry pocket knives as boys when they were in school.

What bothered Brian most was the vacuum his son seemed to fall into while waiting for the hearing, days spent at home watching television or listening to music or surfing the Internet, time without the structure of attending classes and studying and learning at a moment in his life when he needed the discipline the most, as if his son were being rewarded for bad behavior with a luxury vacation. Gina did nothing to abate this behavior, so Brian did his best to give his son a structure to his days, demanding that he use this available time to repaint his bedroom, organize the tools in the garage, and take a class from the Y in automobile repair.

In the end, the school would not budge on the issue of the expulsion, but Brian's points had penetrated its consciousness. In May, shortly before the end of the school year, a settlement was reached where his son would have no record of the arrest and be allowed to graduate eleventh grade if Bert took his senior year at another school in the fall. In mid-June Brian arranged for two vacation weeks and flew his children to Europe, which he saw as a way to give them an educational and bonding experience with him and each other. They went to London, Paris, Florence, and Rome. He left his wife behind in New Jersey, hoping she might discover her independence.

❍

Matt Gallagher was without a boyfriend, as he had been at the beginning of almost every summer for the last ten years. He had a rent-stabilized apartment in Chelsea, a guy who cleaned it regularly, and plenty of money to do a summer house in the Pines again, though he was loathe to reach the end of the season alienated from his jealous housemates because he had slept with all of them and anyone else who had been willing and available. He was an attractive man who made three trips a week to the gym, clipped his own hair (now speckled gray), and did not believe sex was a sacred act. He pursued other men the way they often pursued him—sometimes for friendships, but mostly for sex. They asked him back to their apartments or he asked them back to his; they bought him a drink at a bar or he followed them into the dunes. It was true he was not as sexually active as he was a decade ago: there was the struggle with weight and the slower digestive tract (particularly with dairy and wheat-based foods), but the truth of the matter was some guys just didn't seem as interesting as they had been a few years before. And being HIV-positive and growing older (and hopefully somewhat wiser) he harbored a few ethical codes: no barebacking, no swallowing, no poppers or other recreational drugs.

Matt was forty-six and a partner at a private executive recruiting firm. (He often joked that he could find the right job for the right candidate but couldn't seem to pick a boyfriend who wanted to stick around after the sixth week.) Since college, he'd climbed the HR ladder at various corporate firms, from benefits specialist to labor relations manager to vice president of compensation, and decided, when he reached the age of forty, to use his personal assets to determine his own career path. He had also sero-converted shortly before his decision to become his own boss, and which also coincided with the achievements of the cocktail combination drug therapies. He knew he wasn't going to live forever, but he also knew his diagnosis was not a death sentence. Luck had also been somewhat on his side: his viral load was low and he had continued to remain asymptomatic.

Matt first saw his future wife on the sidewalks of Fifth Avenue at Twenty-second Street while watching the Pride parade. He had decided to stay in town, avoiding the Island, and had eaten a late breakfast at a diner on Ninth Avenue. He had made no plans for the day, except to catch up on reading through some business journals and to make a trip to the gym, and he had decided after eating that he would walk to Fifth Avenue and hover at the sidelines of the parade in hopes of meeting a guy. Instead, he found himself in the middle of a domestic dispute between two women. They were both from Astoria. One woman was shorter and heavier than the other, even though the other appeared to be about six months pregnant. The argument concerned whether or not they were going to cross the street, which meant going through the paraders, through the marching flag wavers and baton twirlers and floats with muscle boys, to the east side of avenue. The pregnant one, Aimee, who was rather pretty, with long black hair and enormous dark eyes, was objecting to crossing the street because she felt faint. She wanted to sit and rest. The moment Matt saw her he felt an attraction that he had never felt before for a woman and probably never, as far as he was concerned, would ever feel again. It was a combination of brotherly, fatherly, and spousal concern.

The heavier woman (who also had a rather unfortunate, severe buzz cut, which made her round face look even heavier and more unattractive than it should have been) yelled to her pregnant partner that she would just "Do it by herself!" and left the woman and raced dramatically through the parade, pushing her hand out in a quick dismissal action toward the on-duty policeman trying to control the crowds watching and marching.

The screaming exchange, the sudden abandonment, and the intensity of Matt's feelings made him approach the pregnant woman and ask if all was okay and if she needed any help.

It was a sweltering morning, heat burning off the sidewalk, the crowds huddling beneath construction scaffolding to avoid the glaring sunlight. The pregnant woman was standing outside the

scaffolding, leaning against a cement wall in the sun, perspiring, her cheeks flushed. She waved Matt away, as if he were a pesky insect. He jogged to the end of the block and bought a bottle of cold water from a street vendor and returned.

"Here, drink this," he said to the woman.

She seemed more uncomfortable with Matt's reappearance, but she took the water bottle, twisted the cap open, and sipped slowly. She thanked him and when she seemed more at ease, Matt said, "Let me help you get some place where you can sit and wait for your girlfriend."

She looked at Matt with her enormous eyes and nodded and walked slowly with him toward Sixth Avenue. He was a great deal taller and he had to lean down to speak to her and try to meet her gaze. As they walked he asked her only general questions. Had she been to the parade before? ("Years ago.") Did she live in the neighborhood? ("No. Queens.") Did she know if her baby was a boy or a girl? ("Yes, a boy, but I haven't settled on a name yet.")

At Sixth Avenue they entered a diner, where, at his insistence, they ordered food. Salad, turkey sandwiches, Jell-O, refills of ice water for her. Slowly her story unfolded. She was twenty-eight and worked as a legal secretary at a law firm on Park Avenue. Her girlfriend worked for the post office and had planned to meet her ex-girlfriend and walk down to the street fair in the Village. She had a cellphone on her and felt certain that once Liz was where she was supposed to be that she would call. They had only been together for a few months, after Paolo had dumped Aimee when she had gotten pregnant. Paolo worked on the loading dock of the building where she worked and they had been having a casual affair until she learned that he was married and separated from a wife, which was about the same time she learned she was pregnant. Her decision to keep the baby was not a religious or ethical one. She wanted a child. The baby was due in late September, though she was worried about a premature birth, since all of the women in her family had delivered prematurely. Liz was a friend of Aimee's

mother's ex-girlfriend. Before she had moved in with Liz, Aimee had been living with her mother in New Jersey, who, she told Matt, had switch-hitted herself before, during, and after the marriage to Aimee's father.

"It's a wild and sometimes wicked world," Aimee laughed. "I just hope I'm not following too closely in her footsteps."

She added that Matt did not need to wait with her until she heard from Liz, that now that she was seated and no longer overheated, she felt better and he didn't need to waste his time. "You probably want to go see the rest of the parade," she said. "Look at all the guys."

He replied that the parade seemed the same every year and he suggested they go to the movies, which took her by surprise. Was there something she wanted to see? he asked her. They could sit in the theater until she heard from her girlfriend.

She rejected the idea, and they sat and talked some more, but after a while the notion of being inside a cool, air-conditioned theater seemed like an easy way to wait, and outside the diner they caught a cab that took them to Times Square.

They sat and watched a comedy about a handsome guy trying to meet a beautiful girl. It wasn't very funny and Aimee fell asleep. Matt found himself watching Aimee sleeping more interesting than watching the film. At the end of the showing, Matt stirred Aimee awake and asked if she wanted to see another feature.

First, she looked at her cellphone and said Liz had still not left a message, then she said, "She's probably glad to be rid of me."

She did not want to see another movie. She was feeling tired and thought she ought to make her way home.

He could not bear to part from her. He had enjoyed her presence, the sound of her voice, the way she constructed her sentences, the way her face looked animated and asleep. Her dilemmas had made him forget any of his own. He was insistent that she take a cab home, and she was as equally insistent that she use the subway, as she did everyday. He offered to pay for the

cab, then offered to pay for a car service, then said that he was so concerned about her that he would rent a car and take her back to her apartment himself. "Don't think about yourself for a moment," Matt said. "Think about the baby."

Finally, she agreed, and he flagged down a cab and spoke to the driver, handing him money and making sure she would be delivered to her doorstep.

"Call me when you get home," he said, handing her his business card and writing his home and cellphone numbers on the back. "Let me know you're alright."

He waved her goodbye and walked to the subway entrance at the end of the block. On the downtown train he cruised a younger guy in a tank top with a tattoo circling his left bicep who took him back to a loft in Tribeca. After Matt had fucked him and showered, the guy asked if Matt wanted to do a bump and go to the dance on the piers. Matt politely declined and made his way back to his apartment on Nineteenth Street, where a message was waiting from Aimee. She thanked him for the meal and the movie and the cab ride home and hoped that they could see each other again. She ended by asking him if he had any suggestions for naming her baby. "Something different," she said. "Something that will help him feel special."

❍

The next week Matt and Aimee spoke on the phone several times. Liz was pissed about this and that and Aimee was worried that she might become hostile. Paolo wanted Aimee to move in with his sister, where he would have a better chance of seeing the baby when it was born. Matt had a business diner the one night Aimee was available to get together, so over the phone he suggested names: Adrian, Wesley, Mitchell. The next day she called him back with her own suggestions: What about Marcus, Lorenzo, or Joshua?

Matt went to Provincetown for the long Independence Day weekend, spending a few extra days with a friend on Nantucket

before returning to the city. Work consumed him for the next week—there was the rush to find a director for a new client and another client was downsizing their personnel and needed constant handholding—and then the following week his father died, and Matt returned to Atlanta for the funeral and to help his older sister prepare to sell their father's house. At the funeral, surrounded by his nephews and their wives and their newborn babies, Matt thought of Aimee. Back at his father's house, he called his secretary and had her track down Aimee's phone numbers. He used his cellphone to call her at the law firm. At first, she didn't recognize his name or his voice; then, startled and stammering, she had an awkward conversation with him because she was not allowed to take personal phone calls at her desk. Briefly and quickly, she told him that she and Liz had broken up ("Big surprise, huh?") and that she was back living with her mother in New Jersey. He told her he was putting a lot of his family's furniture into storage so that his sister would not have it all. Aimee ended the conversation with asking him what he thought of the name Antonio. He answered that Tony could be a good name for a boy.

Back in the city at the end of the month, Matt met a young man at a Democratic fundraiser. His name was Justin and he was a trademark attorney for a large media company and he struck Matt as someone who wanted to be in a relationship. They went back to Matt's apartment and found themselves watching a movie together after sex. They went out on two dinner dates, went gallery shopping in Chelsea one afternoon, and spent a weekend together in the Hamptons. Matt's growing affection for Justin made him forget about Aimee. The next time he called her at her office—from his office—a temp told him she was out on sick leave.

Alarmed, he called her on her cellphone. When she answered, she told him she had started having false contractions and was now living with Paolo's sister. He asked her about her medical benefits, the length of her leave, what doctors she was using, what hospital arrangements had been made, and what she planned to

do with the baby when she went back to work.

"You don't need to be so concerned," she said, but he detected the weakness and vulnerability in the tone of her voice.

"I'd like to make an investment," he said. He didn't tithe to a church because he couldn't overlook religion's narrow-mindedness, didn't donate to his alma mater because an insider had told him that the bureaucracy had turned dysfunctional and greedy, and since the death of his father he wasn't concerned about long-term care for an elderly parent. Brian asked her how he could help her out, what he could send her. Did she need a bassinette or a diaper service or a stroller?

She rebuffed his generosity by saying his good wishes were enough. "What do you think about Ricardo for a name?" she asked him. "Ricky for short. How would that sound to a boy?"

❍

Matt visited Aimee in the hospital when the baby was born. He took the morning off from work, took a car service to New Jersey, and officially met her mother, her two older half-sisters, her younger brother, and Paolo and his sister. He felt awkward and out of place and like he was continually trying to explain his presence to her large, extended family. She had named the baby Nicholas Rafael Rivera, Nico, for short, and before leaving the hospital Matt stopped at the pediatric ward and had a nurse point the baby out to him in the line of cribs. On the car ride back into the city, he decided that his involvement with Aimee should go no further than it had because there wasn't enough room for him in her life and he decided to let her and her baby fade from his concern.

The following week he had an argument with Justin over openness and communication in their growing relationship. It started after Matt mentioned that he needed to get together later in the day on Saturday than their original meeting time because he was going to a backer's audition of an off-Broadway musical he was

considering investing in. Justin knew nothing of Matt's interest in the theater and accused Matt of keeping him at a distance and his cards too close to his chest. The argument spiraled out of control when they got together on Saturday night and Matt confessed that he was not ready yet to be monogamous with Justin, even though there was no other guy that he was currently dating.

Justin disappeared and the summer ended. Matt threw himself back into his work, took trips to London for a vacation and Atlanta to settle his father's estate, and watched the potential musical die an agonizing death when the producers could not find enough backers to make even an off-off-Broadway workshop production possible.

❍

Every morning Brian Kolman woke with his desire burning in his chest. As he shaved and showered and dressed, he watched the morning talk shows, imagining the host or a guest were his secret lover. At work his imagination continued, wondering what it might be like to have a junior stockbroker as his boyfriend, what it might be like to come home to a younger man lustfully waiting for his arrival. What it might like to be involved with a UPS driver, a counterman at the deli where he often got a morning bagel, what it might be like to have a lover who spoke a foreign language. He took meetings with executives from the home office of his firm, had lunches with investment fund managers, conference calls with HR recruiters, all sleekly dressed men with clean-shaven faces and oiled back hair and dressed in crisply bleached white shirts and dark suits. He wondered what it would be like to know these men, have meals with them, fall asleep beside them, find them in his bed in the morning. Would he and his lover wear the same jackets and belts and shoes, or would they separate them out, Brian's one on side of the closet, his lover's on another? He wondered where they might travel together, where they might escape to to escape the rest of the world.

Everywhere he went he saw a potential boyfriend—the grocery store, the hardware store, the nursery, the gas station, the pharmacy. Some times he could relax, simply be a voyeur. Other times his forehead and neck and shoulders would tense with frustration. In the evenings, after the children were settled and involved in their homework or television shows, he would spend a few scattered minutes in the Internet chat rooms, frantically trying to decode screen names and keeping up with IMs from other men in his same situation. Some nights after work, Brian drove into the city to look at an apartment. He had become friendly with a realtor, Sam Vega, an openly gay man his age who professed to have exactly the kind of life that Brian now desired—a handsome boyfriend, an apartment in the West Village, evenings out at a Broadway show or trying a new restaurant on the East Side or laughing at a drag show at a bar near Tompkins Square Park. Brian loved hearing the details of Sam's life and Sam would not allow Brian to limit his future independence to a single neighborhood, unlocking doors for him of high rise apartments in Murray Hill or the newly constructed units near the West Side waterfront.

Every time Brian saw a new apartment he re-imagined his life. What if he had "come out" twenty years earlier? What if he were a single man without the baggage of a family? (And what if he were thinner or taller or darker or had a better hairline or a smaller nose?) Whenever Sam called Brian at the office the following day to discuss details or lease arrangements, Brian would tell him the truth: Sometimes there was the size of the apartment, or the location, or the street noise, or the view. Many times cost was a factor. But Brian wanted to be clear that he was not leading Sam on. "Don't give up on me just yet," he would sigh and finally confess into the phone. "The timing is not right. Things are not good with my family."

Things became worse in the fall. At the beginning of October Brian's daughter Michelle was involved in a serious car accident. Six teenagers were driving home from a football game and were struck by a truck running a red light. One girl was killed. Another was paralyzed. Michelle, in the back seat, suffered broken ribs, a broken leg, and her wrist was shattered when she braced herself against the door at the moment of impact. The funeral made the families unnerved. Michelle's surgery and therapy kept Brian unfocused. Out of pocket medical expenses got out of control and a large amount of Brian's savings were depleted.

Halloween arrived and disappeared and Brian worried that his daughter's spirits were sinking and straining. Bert kept his distance from these new troubles with his younger sister, isolating himself in his room and listening to music. College seemed only a distant possibility for him, until Brian arrived home one night and made him write off for applications.

Gina no longer cleaned the house. Some mornings she left the house before Brian went to work. Some evenings she did not return till after midnight.

❍

The ache returned around the holidays. Matt Gallagher was not the kind of man who had a hobby or could absorb himself for hours in a book. He had visited every museum in the city and had eaten at every restaurant in the Zagat Top Fifty Most Popular Places to dine in Manhattan. He had biked around the five boroughs, rollerbladed along the Hudson, and ice skated at Rockefeller Center. He had done support groups and workout classes and the film festival screenings. He had marched and paraded and raised money and volunteered. He had done the baths, the adult book stores, the private sex clubs, the chat room hook-ups and impromptu orgies. He thought of all the men he had tricked with and all the guys he had rebuffed or attempted to become more serious about. His life

no longer seemed to be about sex or about being gay or finding the right guy, and never about the next dance track or the next new club or the next new musical or opera or gallery opening. He was ready for something deeper, more profound, perhaps, even, spiritual. He needed a connection to something. No, *someone*. It wasn't an issue of growing older. It was about growing more involved.

This had all been prompted by a bad blind date two weeks before Thanksgiving, set up by a friend Matt had known since college. The blind date had quickly morphed into sex without any hint of an emotional resonance, something that Matt had never wanted before but found himself yearning for now. And then Matt found himself too busy at work to make plans for Thanksgiving. He spent the day in front of his television, watching the Macy's parade only blocks from his apartment and thinking of his older sister in Atlanta with her children and grandchildren, and Aimee in New Jersey with her new son.

At the end of the holiday weekend he called Aimee to check up on her. He had not talked to her in almost two months.

She was back living with her mother and battling with Paolo. Paolo had a new girlfriend and his sister did not have a maternal streak in her body and was not pleasant to the baby, which was why she had left. Liz had broken up again with her ex-girlfriend and was trying to get back with Aimee and wanted her to return to the Queens apartment. "I'll be glad to get back to work and away from all this drama," she told Matt.

Her maternity leave was coming to an end, but there was still the issue of daycare for Nico. Aimee said she thought she had found a woman two blocks away who could watch the baby for three out of the five weekdays, and there was the possibility of Paolo's mother watching him the other two, something she did not want to rely on.

"I could get him into a daycare center for you," Matt said. "I've got a few strings I can pull. Even in New Jersey."

"Why would you do that?" she asked.

"Consider it a Christmas gift," he answered. "And it's something I can do for you."

❍

On Christmas Eve, Matt rented a car and drove to New Jersey. He took Aimee out to a nice dinner while the baby stayed with Aimee's mother. He had not seen Aimee since his visit to the hospital. Aimee was embarrassed to be so well treated, to be pampered and wined and dined like she had never been before. She thanked Matt awkwardly and frequently.

Before he drove back to the city, Matt drove through the New Jersey suburbs, studying the towns and homes and highway intersections. He told himself he was only looking at the holiday decorations and lights. But at the back of his mind was the thought that maybe some day he would move out of the city and would want to know where he should look. He had always believed he might end up with a house in the Hamptons or maybe in Connecticut. He had never been fond of New Jersey, but now it looked like something different to him.

❍

Three days after Christmas, Brian Kolman was arrested. He had gone to the city to have dinner with a brokerage client who managed a large pension fund and then looked at an apartment in Hell's Kitchen Sam had called him about. Afterward, he had thought about going to a gay bar on the Upper East Side, but he got cold feet and parking was difficult to find and he didn't want to pay for another garage, so he decided instead to drive back home. Off the Jersey Turnpike, he stopped at a rest stop he had heard about in a chat room. He had no intention of hooking up or hiring someone for sex. He only wanted to see the process, to understand

the game a little bit better, to satisfy his curiosity. His plan was only to look and leave.

When he walked into the men's room, an arrest was in progress. Brian turned to flee and knocked into another policeman who was entering behind him. Brian was charged with aggravated assault, recklessly endangering another person, resisting arrest, criminal solicitation, and patronizing male prostitutes. He was arraigned before a district justice, who set his bail at a quarter of a million dollars.

His tumble was swift. Within a week he had been terminated and replaced by another branch manager, even though a lawyer had the charges dropped because no officer could report a conversation about Brian's intent of solicitation for sex or any kind of criminal activity. Brian did his best to see that these circumstances did not decide his own "end of the world" scenario. Instead, he used it as leverage to file charges against his former employer, find another job, tell his wife he was divorcing her, and explain to his children that he wanted to live openly as a gay man.

Unfortunately, this all sounded better in theory. The loss of his job depressed him. The loss of his family support depressed him; his children would not stay in the same room with him, his mother would not talk to him on the phone, and his older brothers acted like he was road kill, ready to dismantle his assets. He saw a long, hard struggle ahead. And then his wife told him she no longer loved him. Angered, Brian felt forced to trump her and make her cry; he told her he had *never* loved her. All their years together had been a sham, a mistake, a joke. He had only been pretending to be her husband. He had never loved her at all.

❍

In the second week of January Matt received a frantic call at the office. It was Aimee. Paolo was stalking her. She needed help. Paolo had broken up with his new girlfriend and wanted to see the baby.

He had found out about the daycare center from his sister. Aimee had already been late every day that week and had missed two days the week before. If she left again, she was going to be fired. Was there any way that Matt could get to the daycare center and pick up Nico before Paolo got there that afternoon? Aimee was worried Paolo would try to use her son as leverage to see him.

Matt canceled his afternoon appointments and left work as soon as his car service had a sedan ready for him in front of his building. The trip to New Jersey took almost an hour because of the midday traffic. At the daycare center Matt introduced himself to Mrs. Mallow, the woman who sent him the invoices, and he asked if Aimee had made arrangements for him to pick up Nico. He showed her his driver's license to verify his identification.

Matt took Nico back to his apartment in the sedan. The baby came with a bundle of diapers and bottles of juice and milk. There was no toy or rattle or pacifier and Matt spent the rest of the afternoon pacing back and forth in front of the couch, where he had placed the baby, worried that the baby would start crying or that something was going to happen to him. Nico looked up at Matt looking down at him. When Matt was at a lost of what to do next, he checked the baby's diaper to see if it had been soiled. (It hadn't.) He spent the next two hours holding Nico in his arms and watching him sleep. He found it scary and thrilling and awesome.

Matt had lived in his apartment for more than twenty years. Twenty-three years and seven months to be exact. He had moved in the summer after he had graduated from Yale. His mother was alive and had flown in from Atlanta with his father and a suitcase full of sheets and towels for Matt's new apartment.

His first year he had slept on a collapsible futon mattress which he replaced with a firmer mattress and a frame of wooden slats which had to be occasionally replaced if his sexual antics were a bit too rambunctious. In his early years he had had a steady stream of visitors—college friends wanting to visit the city, guys who slept

with him or on his couch and would leave him thank you gifts like joints or umbrellas or subway tokens. There was always a pair of shoes under his bed that were not his and a spare bathrobe on the back of the bedroom door if one was needed. The filing cabinet in his closet he had found on the street. The nude male portrait by the door had been a gift of his friend Eric, a photographer who lived upstairs. The roll top desk in the bedroom had belonged to another tenant, a writer upstairs who had died of AIDS. His building had been home to a lot of victims and volunteers and activists, a small planet that seemed to change with every orbit.

Aimee arrived after work. She checked on Nico first, before asking if Matt had met with any difficulty at the daycare center or back in his apartment with the baby. He answered that the baby had been a good companion, not crying and sleeping most of the time. She asked if Nico had been fed and he told her he wasn't sure what to do so she lifted the baby into her arms, rocked him, and gave him a bottle of juice. Matt asked Aimee to stay for dinner.

He ordered takeout from a new Thai restaurant on Eighth Avenue, which came in less than fifteen minutes. After they had eaten and cleaned the dishes and Nico was sleeping, Matt told Aimee he would call a car service to take her home. She balked at the expense and he told her he had the money to do it. Next, he told her he had a lot of money to do a lot of things he wanted. Particularly since his father had died and he had come into more money than he had anticipated on having at this stage of his life. He needed to find deductions. It was a bad way of putting it, but he didn't want to say the "love" word or display his own needs or wants or desires.

While she was packing up Nico's bottles into a carry-bag, he asked her if she wanted to live together. He told her he could buy a house in New Jersey or Long Island or Connecticut and that she could stay home and take care of Nico if she didn't want to work.

She thought he was joking, but he told her it had nothing to do with him wanting to have sex with her or expecting her to work for him. It was all about security and bonding and connecting with

someone. What he wanted was a friendly face to come home to at the end of his day and to be a part of his day. Every day.

They could do a trial run and if things didn't work out, they would both move on. If things worked out, then they could get married and he would adopt Nico and see that the boy had a good life and a good education. He told her she didn't have to give him an answer right away and she could change her mind at any time.

"Why are you being so good to me?" she asked him. "We hardly know each other."

He told her he had slept with close to four thousand men. (He explained his calculations—three tricks a week for twenty-three years and factoring in the multiple partner scenarios and not including the repeats was how he came to his conclusion.) Then he told her he was HIV-positive, a result, he thought, of attending a private sex club uptown near Columbia a few times when he was thirty-eight years old. He told her that this had nothing to do with his wanting to stop having sex with men. That would continue. That was who he was and though it might slow down and be less adventurous, he doubted that it would ever stop. But he would not let it impact her or the baby. And it had nothing to do with whatever affairs she wanted to have herself. Even if she met someone else she wanted to live with, it would not negate the time they would have shared together. Instead, he told her he was ready for some kind of changes in his life. He wanted to move outside the city. He wanted to be part of a growing family.

In February, Matt and Aimee began house hunting on the weekends. By March they had found a house in Plainfield and a house in Asbury Park that they both liked. Both towns had growing gay and lesbian neighborhoods.

That week Sam called Brian and told him had a lead on a "steal of a place" that was becoming available in Chelsea; it was just a

matter of time before the tenant vacated to move to the suburbs. The rent was hideously low because the tenant had lived in the building "like forever." Brian was working as a circulation director for a newspaper in Newark, the same paper he had delivered house-to-house when he was a boy. He was occasionally seeing a man who lived in Cherry Hill, a lawyer who had been a friend of a friend of the attorney who had helped him settle his criminal case. Brian felt his life was taking a better shape. He told Sam to keep him on his "short list" for the apartment.

Matt decided on the house in Asbury Park because he felt the house was a better investment and they could be close to the shore, even though it meant a longer commute to work for him. They closed on the house in the middle of May. Aimee moved in immediately and Matt had the furniture from his father's house that he had been keeping in storage delivered. It took Matt close to a month to clean out and leave his apartment in Manhattan behind.

In April Brian's sometime boyfriend announced that he would be working on an election campaign in Pennsylvania, which meant he would be spending a great deal of time in Harrisburg and Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Brian took this as an omen that their "friendship" was coming to an end and that he should sign the lease for the apartment in Manhattan. It was a one-bedroom unit on the fourth floor of a building on Nineteenth Street named the Chelsea Rose, only steps away from the center of the "known gay universe"—Eighth Avenue. He could move in at the beginning of June.

Matt shipped his record collection and CDs to New Jersey, along with his clothes and shoes. He tossed out the microwave, but kept the rollerblades and the bike. The mattress was the last to go. He had a neighbor help him haul it down to the street on the morning the sanitation department would pick it up.

Matt and Brian met briefly one night the week before Brian was to move into the apartment. It had been arranged by Sam

for a few extra bucks under the table from Brian. Matt greeted him at the door and waved him into the apartment, which was bare except for the roll top desk, a small table and chairs, and the wooden slat frame of the bed. He walked Brian through the rooms and showed him some of the little quirks of the place—the freezer door that didn't completely close, the caulking around the tub which would easily mold, the curved rod in the closet which should probably be replaced.

They did not talk about boyfriends or wives or children or houses. Brian politely asked Matt where he was moving to.

"New Jersey," he answered.

"Ah," Brian replied. "Know it well."

Matt asked Brian if he wanted any of the remaining furniture before he tossed it out onto the street.

To Brian it looked like gold. He kept it all and was happy.

About the Author

Jameson Currier is the author of three novels: *Where the Rainbow Ends*, nominated for a Lambda Literary award, *The Wolf at the Door*, and *The Third Buddha*; and four collections of short fiction: *Dancing on the Moon; Desire, Lust, Passion, Sex; Still Dancing: New and Selected Stories;* and *The Haunted Heart and Other Tales*, which was awarded a Black Quill Award. His short fiction has appeared in many literary magazines and Web sites, including *Blithe House Quarterly, Velvet Mafia, Confrontation, Christopher Street,* and the anthologies *Men on Men 5, Best American Gay Fiction 3, Certain Voices, Best Gay Erotica, Best American Erotica, Best Gay Romance, Best Gay Stories, Circa 2000, Rebel Yell, Wilde Stories, Unspeakable Horror, Art from Art*, and *Making Literature Matter*. His AIDS-themed short stories have been translated into French by Anne-Laure Hubert and published as *Les Fantômes*. He was awarded a fiction grant from the Arch and Bruce Brown Foundation for his novel, *Where the Rainbow Ends*, which was cited for its historical breadth and depiction of the gay and lesbian communities during the AIDS crisis, and he is the author of the documentary film, *Living Proof: HIV and the Pursuit of Happiness*. His reviews, essays, interviews, and articles on AIDS and gay culture have been published in many national and local publications, including *The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, Newsday, The Dallas Morning News, The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine, Lambda Book Report, The Harvard Gay and*

Lesbian Review, The Washington Blade, Bay Area Reporter, The New York Native, The New York Blade, Out, and *Body Positive*. Since 2002 he has compiled a monthly digest of LGBT publishing notes which can be currently found on his blog *Queertype*. In 2010 he founded Chelsea Station Editions, an independent press devoted to gay literature. Among the authors the press has published are debut writers David Pratt, Craig Moreau, Michael Graves, and Corey Rosenberg, and veterans Felice Picano, Walter Holland, Charles Silverstein, Wesley Gibson, and Jon Marans.

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"Jameson Currier's kind of fiction can recreate reality more accurately than a cinema verité account of our daily lives... Currier captures the bittersweet existence of gay men living through this holocaust, the afterglow when the bombs have fallen and before news of further devastation reaches them."
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"The breadth of Currier's personal experience is evident in his writing, which is moving without resorting to melodrama, familiar without feeling clichéd."
—Wayne Hoffman, *Windy City Times*

"Currier's latest collection of stories reveals a long, textured chronicle of gay men, gay life, and the horrific AIDS epidemic that both threatens and empowers an entire population. His tales tell of the initial shock and bewilderment in trying to come to grips with a deadly new menace to gay men's health in the 1980s, coupled with an unending sense of grief and hopelessness. Be forewarned: these are not sunny stories, but they're as real as it gets. Currier's fiction isn't the kind with the Hollywood happy ending secured with a pink ribbon. Currier is a bright, astute writer and a survivor, having lived in New York City for 30 years and experienced much of the stark, heavy content reflected in his stories. They are markers—intense reminders of our collective history."
—Jim Piechota, *Bay Area Reporter*

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